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BELOW THE DEAD LINE

SCOTT CAMPBELL





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BELOW THE DEAD-LINE

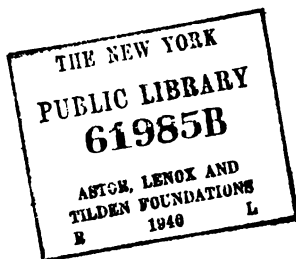
BY
SCOTT CAMPBELL

AUTHOR OF

"The Doctor's Secret," "Driven to the Wall," "A Plot
for Millions," "His Double Self,"
"Sealed Lips," etc.



G. W. DILLINGHAM COMPANY
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK



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Below the Dead-Line Issued March, 1906

FOREWORD

When Inspector Byrnes commanded the New York police force he found it necessary to issue an order calling for the instant arrest of every crook found day or night in that part of the metropolis lying south of Fulton Street. This stringent order quickly gained for the district the title "Below the Dead-Line," at least in police circles. As the lower part of the city contains Wall and Broad Streets and Maiden Lane, where the great diamond houses are located, various efforts were made by the "under-world" to evade the order. For several years a number of crooks, headed by an unknown but extremely clever criminal, succeeded in operating in the district despite the police, and it is to chronicle their doings and their ultimate capture that Mr. Scott Campbell has written this interesting series of stories.

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BELOW THE DEAD-LINE.

The Case of the Vanished Bonds.

I.

The man sent for was Mr. Felix Boyd.

Precisely why Messrs. Curry, Gale & Fiske, the great New York banking-house, instantly appealed to Mr. Boyd, instead of applying to the police or at the central office for assistance, possibly may always remain open to general conjecture. For the whole truth concerning Mr. Felix Boyd cannot here be told. Doubtless there are many who can disclose the facts pertaining to his extraordinary talents, as well as those relating to his peculiar mission in and about Wall Street, but their lips invariably are closely sealed upon the subject.

Therefore, any very comprehensive disclosures, if made by one now confidentially received in intimate relations by Boyd himself, in order that some accounts of his remarkable work may for the first time be published, could be regarded only as a dishonorable betrayal of really portentous secrets.

Mr. Felix Boyd, however, while the subject of much curious speculation, is not quite the man of mystery suggested by the above. He is not entirely a stranger to frequenters of that strenuous section of New York which lies south of Fulton Street, the home of the Stock Exchange, the sub-treasury, the greatest banks and banking-houses of the country, and the wealthy diamond dealers of Maiden Lane. Below this Fulton Street "dead-line" Mr. Felix Boyd is not wholly unknown.

Frequenters of Wall and Broad Streets occasionally see him walking aimlessly about—a reserved, well-dressed man close upon forty, of erect and athletic build, with a smoothly shaven, clean-cut face, lighted by a pair of seemingly indifferent yet keenly observant gray eyes.

It is known that Boyd has an office in Pine Street, but for what business purposes few can tell. It is thought, too, that he has secret relations of some sort with the police and the central office, though not in any official capacity; for he at times is seen to be very friendly with Mr. Jimmie Coleman, a plain-clothes man long stationed in the localities mentioned.

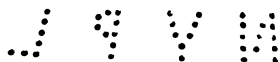
Some few wiseacres, indeed, go as far as to openly assert that Boyd is neither more nor less than an American Sherlock Holmes, a man of most extraordinary detective ability in the secret employ of some of the great banking institutions, and their immediate resort in any great criminal emergency; but the opinion of these wiseacres, as a matter of fact, is not worth a whit more than that of many a less pretentious observer.

Be all this as it may, Mr. Felix Boyd was the man hurriedly sent for by Messrs. Curry, Gale & Fiske, and who promptly appeared at their banking-offices in Wall Street in response to their urgent summons. He was received by Mr. Fiske, the junior partner, whose pale face and disturbed manner evinced considerable mental distress, and who at once conducted Felix Boyd into a private office.

"It's a case of robbery, Mr. Boyd, and a most mystifying affair," he hastened to explain, in a nervous, jerky fashion. "Both of my partners are absent—Mr. Curry out of town, and Mr. Gale at the Exchange—and I am at my wits' end over our loss."

"Well, well, calm yourself," Boyd coolly advised, taking a chair. "Give me the main facts as briefly and quickly as possible."

"They may be stated in a nutshell. Mr. Benson, one of our most trusty clerks, left here half-an-hour ago to take some bonds and gold to the sub-treasury. He had the coin and securities in a leather bag, which did not once leave his hand during the trip. Yet upon arriving



at the sub-treasury and opening the bag, he discovered that the bonds were missing. We are compelled to believe that they were abstracted during his journey, in spite of the fact that the means employed appear utterly inexplicable. Benson at once returned——”

“Wait!” Boyd abruptly interposed. “That really is all you know about the case, Mr. Fiske, isn’t it?”

“Why, yes, except what Benson has stated.”

“I will hear the details from Benson’s own lips, if you please. Hold on! Don’t call him yet. Evidently this is a case requiring rapid work, if anything is to be accomplished, and I can get at it quickest in my own way. What about this Benson? Do you believe him honest?”

“Perfectly. He has been in our employ many years, and his habits are exemplary. He is about forty-five, and lives in Brooklyn with his aged mother and a maiden sister.”

“Do you know if he has any pressing need for money just now? Is he addicted to speculation?”

“No, no, never. It is a rigid rule here that none of our clerks shall speculate in the market. I do not believe that Benson ever has violated that rule.”

“What is the value of the stolen bonds?”

“Nearly ninety thousand dollars.”

“Negotiable?”

“Yes.”

“Is it your custom frequently to send out securities in this way?”

“Quite frequently. The amount to-day, however, was considerably larger than usual.”

“Ah! is that so? Quite unfortunate!” said Boyd, with an odd gleam in his attentive gray eyes. “Is Benson always your messenger on such occasions?”

“Almost invariably.”

“Enough,” said Boyd tersely. “Call him in here.”

A word from Mr. Fiske brought Benson into the private office.

He was a tall, spare man, with a rather cadaverous face, just then as void of color as the linen at his throat. A more poignant distress scarce could be depicted in a human countenance, and Boyd saw at a glance that fear was his predominating sentiment.

"Sit down, Mr. Benson," said he, in his crisp, curt fashion. "You have met with a great misfortune this morning."

"Misfortune—God only knows how great a one!" cried Benson, dropping into a chair and wringing his long, tremulous hands. "And God knows, too, that I'm wholly innocent of any——"

"Well, well, we'll start with assuming your entire innocence," interposed Boyd. "Nobody has accused you of evil designs, and Mr. Fiske here speaks only well of you. Now, I want every fact that you can impart bearing upon this robbery, and as quickly as possible. Where is the bag in which you were carrying the gold and bonds?"

"I'll get it, Boyd," cried Fiske, hastening to an inner room.

He returned in a moment, bringing a stout leather bag, such as bank clerks frequently carry, the mouth of which is secured with a short strap and buckle. As Fiske placed it on a chair, Boyd quickly leaned forward and opened it.

"Ah! the gold is still here," he cried, "tied in a small canvas bag. Was it thus when you left here with it, Mr. Benson?"

"Just as you see it, sir," groaned Benson, trembling visibly.

"Plainly the bag has suffered no injury, as from a knife in the hand of a thief. Now, answer me, Mr. Benson. Who placed the bonds and gold in the bag for transportation?"

"I did, sir. I took them from a safe in the inner room, under Mr. Fiske's directions, and put both in the bag and buckled it. Mr. Fiske saw me do so, also Miss Dole, his stenographer. The bonds were in a single package, secured with two rubber bands, and the bag of gold was on top of them."

"Did you at once start for the sub-treasury?"

"Not at once. I delayed to wash my hands at the lavatory, leaving the bag and its contents on the table in the next room. Both Mr. Fiske and Miss Dole remained there, however, so the theft could not possibly have been committed at that time."

Boyd glanced quickly at Fiske, and asked:

"Did you leave Miss Dole alone in that room while Benson was washing his hands?"

"I left her for barely a moment. I came here to my desk after some letters. Of course, I had no suspicion——"

"How was Miss Dole engaged while Benson was packing the bag?"

"She was typewriting a letter for me."

"Step into that inner room as if to get something, and leave the door open for a moment," commanded Boyd, lowering his voice a little. "I want a look at the room—and the stenographer."

Mr. Fiske complied, and Boyd quietly drew nearer the door between the two rooms. The inner one was the smaller, having a desk and a table, a safe in one of the walls, a stenographer's stand and outfit, and one window looking out into Wall Street. While he peered briefly into the room, Boyd saw that Miss Dole was a tall, fashionably dressed girl, with an abundance of auburn hair, and that she was seated at her typewriter close by the window. Boyd glanced up at the window-catch, and saw that it was locked.

"Has Miss Dole left that room since Benson packed the bag?" he asked, after Fiske had returned and closed the door.

"No, sir. I can swear to that."

"How about the window? Can she have opened it without your knowledge, to have dropped out the package of bonds to a confederate, assuming her to have removed it from the bag while you both were absent?"

"Impossible!" declared Fiske. "I was absent only a moment, and she would have had to mount the sill in order to throw the catch. She could not possibly have done so, and opened and closed the window, without my having seen or heard her."

"I see that it is locked now," returned Boyd, apparently dismissing with a snap of his thumb and finger further consideration of the girl.

Then he reverted quickly to Benson, and said:

"Now to continue. After washing your hands, what did you do?"

"I came and got the bag, and then hastened directly to the sub-treasury. I did not enter any place on the way, but went as quickly as possible. When I opened the bag, I at once saw that the package of bonds had been abstracted. As truly as God hears me, gentlemen, I nearly fainted. I at once closed the bag, and rushed here at the top of my speed to report the robbery to Mr. Fiske. That was less than half-an-hour ago."

For a moment Boyd sat silent, with his searching gaze fixed upon the ghastly countenance of the agitated clerk. Then he abruptly exclaimed, with decisive intonation:

"Oh, come, come, come! That's not the whole story, Benson! You imply that the bag did not once leave your hand. In that case this robbery would have been utterly impossible, since the bag is intact, and you found it closed and buckled in reaching your destination. Benson, you are suppressing something! Out with it, now! Where did you stop on the way?"

Boyd's influence over others at such a time is well-nigh irresistible. To Fiske's manifest surprise, yet not a whit to that of Felix Boyd, the clerk, instead of replying, suddenly bowed forward in his chair, covering his pallid face with his hands, and burst into tears.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Fiske. "What's the meaning of this?"

Felix Boyd already had arisen, and approached to lay his hand on Benson's shoulder.

"Come, come, Benson!" he cried kindly. "Pull yourself together and tell me the whole truth. I am quite convinced that you are guilty of an indiscretion only, not of any premeditated crime. Redeem yourself, then, by an immediate confession of the whole truth. The recovery of these bonds may depend upon it, and each passing moment may be of value. Speak up like a man."

Benson, half choked with sobs, raised his haggard face and nodded.

"I will, sir; indeed, I will," he groaned, in almost abject despair. "God forgive me, Mr. Fiske, for having deceived you! I have lied in one point only, yet I felt that my statement was equivalent to the truth, for I cannot conceive how this crime could have been committed. Not for a moment did the bag leave my sight, sir, yet I

did stop just once on the way and set it down—only once, sir.”

Fiske appeared about to reply, but Boyd silenced him with a hurried gesture.

“Time is valuable!” he cried pointedly. “Now, answer me, Benson. Where did you stop, and for what?”

The clerk controlled his agitation with an effort, and hastened to explain.

“I stopped in front of the new Howard building,” said he; “and talked for a few minutes with a man named Paul Wykoff. He is a curb broker, whom I have known for several weeks, and I have been guilty of speculating, Mr. Fiske, with the secret aid of Mr. Wykoff. Heaven forgive me for it, but I——”

“Defer all digressions of that sort, Benson,” interrupted Boyd sharply. “Now, tell me. Have you lost money in the market, and are you short in your accounts?”

“On my word, no!” cried Benson. “I never have touched one penny of another’s money, and am some to the good in my speculations. These have been confined entirely to tips given me by Wykoff, who has an office in Broad Street, and who has done my trading for me. I never once have been to Wykoff’s office, lest it should leak out that I was speculating, but have always made my deals with him in an interview on the street.”

“Quickly now!” commanded Boyd. “Did Wykoff first invite you to begin speculating?”

“He did, yes. Some weeks ago. He has made a little money for me, and I have had every confidence in him and his advice.”

“Have you been meeting him daily?”

“Not every day, but several times each week.”

“Ring up my office, Mr. Fiske,” cried Boyd sharply. “You will find the number on this card. I wish to telephone my office boy.”

The banker hastened out to comply, while Felix Boyd quickly continued his interview with Benson.

“Just where did you meet Wykoff this morning?” he demanded.

“Nearly at the door of the Howard building. He saw me approaching, and hastened across the street to join

me. He asked me to give him time in which to compare our accounts, it being the first of the month. I said that I was in haste, but he insisted that he would detain me only a moment. So I complied, and stepped into the vestibule of the Howard building, placing the bag on one of the steps, with my foot against it; then I took out and consulted my note-book. I remained there less than five minutes, sir, at the longest."

Boyd's brows had knit to a frown over his keen gray eyes, and his rapid questions now were asked with an intensity indicating his virile mental powers.

"Now, be careful!" he commanded. "Did Wykoff ask you to step into the vestibule?"

"No, he did not," replied Benson. "Yet, now that you speak of it, I think he rather urged me that way."

"Which side of the vestibule did you occupy?"

"The north side."

"On which step did you stand?"

"The lower one, just above the sidewalk."

"Were you approached by any third person while you stood there?"

"Not one, sir, I am sure. The building is not yet completed, and the doorway at the top of the steps is still boarded up. I am absolutely sure that no third person was on the steps, and that no one came near us while we stood there. The bag did not leave the step at my feet, of that also I am sure; nor did Wykoff make the slightest move in its direction."

"Where did he stand?"

"He stood directly in front of me all the time, sir, while we compared the notes each of us had produced. I do not see how the theft could possibly have been committed then, for——"

"Never mind what you cannot see," interrupted Boyd. "Tell me how Wykoff was dressed. Did he wear an overcoat?"

"He wore a long rain coat, reaching nearly to his ankles, and carried a closed umbrella. I am positive that he did not once stoop toward the bag, if you suspect him of any part in the job, for I remember distinctly that he held his note-book in one hand, and his umbrella in the other. I am sure about the umbrella, sir, for I heard him

absently drumming with it on the sidewalk nearly all the time we stood there. On my word, Mr. Boyd, I cannot believe——"

"Wait! Here is Mr. Fiske."

"All ready, Boyd. The wire is waiting. Come this way."

Boyd hastened to the telephone-closet and shut himself in.

"Hello!" he cried over the wire. "Is that you, Terry?"

"Yes."

"I am Boyd. Hurry out and see if you can find Coleman. If you can, send him at once to——"

"Wait a bit, sir! Mr. Coleman happens to be right here."

"Capital! Ask him to meet me at the corner of Pine and William Streets. I will be there in five minutes. Tell him to look sharp."

Boyd did not wait for a reply. Returning to the private office, he asked Benson only one more question:

"Did you report this robbery at the sub-treasury?"

"No, sir. I have reported it only to Mr. Fiske."

"That's all," said Boyd, signing him from the room. "Now, Mr. Fiske, just a word with you. This case presents some very curious features, and one rather serious question. We are up against one or more criminals of extraordinary nerve and sagacity. An attempt to secure all of them possibly may fail, or perhaps involve the permanent loss of your bonds. I infer that you consider the recovery of the bonds to be of much the greater importance."

"Decidedly so!" cried Fiske. "Get the bonds, if you can, by all means."

"I cannot ensure even that," replied Boyd gravely; "but I will make an attempt. Meantime, you must give no publicity to the affair. Not a word until I advise it."

"Very well."

"You shall hear from me before evening, one way or another. Detain Benson here, in case I wish to communicate with him, and instruct him to say no more of the case. In a word, Mr. Fiske, it must be left entirely to me for the present."

"It shall be, Boyd."

"As for your stenographer," added Felix Boyd, in slightly louder tones; "dismiss any misgivings concerning her integrity. She appears to be a nice young lady, as no doubt she really is. Now, sir, I'm away."

II.

It was quite plain to Felix Boyd that Benson finally had told the truth, also that a well-planned robbery, requiring extraordinary nerve and dexterity, had been committed. That several were involved in it, moreover, Boyd felt quite convinced; and while the discovery and arrest of all hands was desirable, the fact that any protracted delay for the purpose of investigation might operate against the recovery of the stolen bonds shaped his immediate course.

Hastening to meet Coleman, who was a central office man, Boyd very briefly informed him of the main facts of the robbery, and readily obtained his assistance.

"All I require of you at present, Jimmie," Boyd went on to explain, "is to locate and keep an eye on Wykoff. Superficially, it looks as if he had had a hand in the job, but in just what way, or how well his tracks are covered and his plans laid, we can only conjecture. First of all, I wish to nail the bonds, if possible."

"I see the point," nodded Coleman, a compact, muscular man of fifty. "Furthermore, I know Wykoff by sight, and think I readily can locate him. He is a curb broker, I believe, but I know nothing against him."

"Very good. If you should see me speak to him later, pay no attention to it. Watch him constantly, and, in case he approaches the new Howard building, don't lose sight of him for an instant."

"Trust me, Felix," said Coleman, with a dry laugh. "My lamps are well trimmed and trained for work of that kind. Where now?"

"To my office. I'll see you later, or send word by Terry."

With which Boyd walked briskly away, while Coleman repaired to Wall Street.

It was nearly noon, a dull November day. A murky

drizzle with occasional showers had continued since early morning, spreading the pavements with slippery mud, and rendering out-of-door objects indescribably cold and clammy.

Boyd's quarters in Pine Street comprised a small back office on the second floor, with an adjoining side room, having a single window of ground glass. He employed only an office boy of fifteen, named Terrance Gowan, a youngster remarkable for his ready wit and native shrewdness.

"A robbery has just been committed in Wall Street, Terry," said Boyd, on entering. "I want you to go down there."

"Yes, sir. Did you meet Mr. Coleman?"

"I have just left him. You know the offices of Curry, Gale & Fiske. At the window farthest south you will see a red-headed typewriter. Go down there and watch her."

"In my peculiar way, sir?" inquired the lad, with a grin.

"Decidedly so," laughed Boyd. "Make sure you are not observed by her, or by any one outside. Note her every move at the window, and whether she communicates by sign or gesture with anybody on the street. In case she does, quietly report the fact to Coleman, whom you will see about there. I'll interview him later, and you keep away from me, as you are known to be in my employ. Now, be off and look after the girl."

"Trust me, Mr. Boyd! That's my long suit, sir, looking after the girls—specially red-headed girls!"

Boyd knew the real worth of the lad, and smiled. Throwing off his coat, he unlocked the inner room. Hung upon pegs in the walls was an array of garments that would have made a creditable display in a second-hand clothier's shop. In one corner stood a chest of drawers, containing an endless assortment of shirts, linen, wigs, beards, and the like, all in perfect order. Near the window was a broad plate mirror, and on a shelf below it a box of grease-paints and all the materials for effecting an artistic make-up.

Entering this room, Boyd quickly removed his collar and tie. Then, with an art and celerity by no means de-

scribable, he speedily transformed himself into the likeness of a well-to-do Hebrew, with each and every superficial feature so perfect as to completely mask his own personality.

Thus transfigured, he slipped a revolver into each hip pocket and started for the Howard building, so-called. Five minutes brought him in front of the imposing edifice. The exterior was nearly completed, but much of the inside work remained to be done. The sidewalk fronting it had but recently been cleared, and the main entrance within the broad vestibule still was roughly boarded up, with only a small door left for workmen, and bearing the forbidding sign—"No Admission!"

It was here that Benson claimed to have held his interview with Paul Wykoff, and Boyd saw at a glance the meager possibilities the place presented for such a robbery as that said to have been committed.

The vestibule had a rise of seven broad stone steps, the lower one being about twelve inches in from the sidewalk, while a smooth marble wall flanked the steps on each side. As Benson had stated, it appeared utterly impossible for him to have been secretly approached, either from within the vestibule or from the sidewalk.

Without waiting to make a close inspection, and despite the sign on the door, Boyd quickly mounted the steps and entered the building. He found the broad corridors obstructed with loose sheathing and accumulated rubbish, with carpenters busily at work on the unfinished walls and stairways. To none of these he gave any attention, however, but at once made his way to the basement.

There the disorder and confusion were even greater. Masons and plasterers still were at work; plumbers were busy in quarters where the construction was further advanced; numerous semi-obscure passages and incomplete corridors formed a maze quite confusing to an unaccustomed eye; while the unfinished stone floors were so covered with loose earth and broken bricks and stone as to fairly imperil one's shins and ankles.

Nevertheless, Boyd quickly discovered that work in several of the front basement offices was quite well along, and thither he made his way, observing that in two of

them tessellated floors were being laid by some of the vast gang of laborers employed in the building.

In a third office, which Boyd saw was just below and north of the vestibule mentioned, the tessellated floor was about completed, and a burly, bearded man in a long plaid ulster stood surveying the job. Despite his size and years he was vigorously puffing a paper cigarette, and the yellow stain acquired from the habit marked his thumb and fingers; while upon the floor in the south corner of the room lay a number of charred paper stubs, as if tossed in that direction only.

He turned quickly when Boyd appeared at the open doorway, and the latter hastened to ask, with an obsequious scrape and bow:

"Vair can I find one of the posses, sir? I am looking for one of the posses."

The man in the ulster bestowed one searching look at the intruder's face, then tossed his cigarette through the open doorway, and replied, with a sonorous, indifferent voice:

"I am Mr. Gorman, one of the boss masons. What do you wish to learn?"

"I wish to ask about renting one of the offices, Mr. Gorman, one of the sheepest offices," Boyd explained, with a great display of rather servile politeness, while he produced and tendered a neat business card. "I am Mr. Solomon, sir; Mr. Isaac Solomon, in the prokerage bishness. Who vill I haf to see about renting one of the offices?"

"You must see the owners of the building, of course, instead of a boss workman," growled Mr. Gorman, with a glance at the card he had accepted. "But it will be at least two months before any of these offices can be occupied."

"Doo months—so long as that?" exclaimed Boyd, throwing up his hands. "Who vould haf thought it?"

"The inside finish is only just begun, my dear man."

"But maybe I could arrange for the renting, Mr. Gorman," suggested Boyd, with a curious smirk and whine. "I vant one of these pasement offices ven the vork is all done, and maybe I could see about the renting."

"Possibly," admitted Gorman indifferently. "You'll have to consult Mr. Ellery about that."

"Vair can I find him, blease?"

"At his office on Broadway, I suppose. I don't know the number."

"The light is not so goot as it might pe," muttered Boyd, gazing up at the row of ground-glass windows, the lower edges of which, being flush with the front sidewalk, were several feet above the office floor. "Vould they put in blain glass for me, Mr. Gorman, vich vould let in the sunshine petter?"

"I cannot answer that," replied Gorman. "If you were to rent the office, possibly the glass might be changed."

"Blain glass vould make it petter—much petter!" declared Boyd, preparing to depart. "Vould I pe likely to see Mr. Ellery here, Mr. Gorman, if I vaited for him?"

"Very likely, Mr. Solomon, but you might have to wait a day or two," rejoined Gorman, with a grin.

"Vell, vell, I couldn't vait as long as that," cried Boyd, bowing and laughing. "I vill see him at his office. I am opliged to you, Mr. Gorman, greatly opliged. Vich vay—vich vay did I gum down?"

"That way—to the right! That's it!"

Boyd had withdrawn from the office, and was turning this way and that with a sort of grotesque confusion; but with Gorman's directions he proceeded to pick his way through the darker passage making toward the stairs, which he presently appeared to succeed in locating. As he mounted them, he glanced furtively back, and observed that Mr. Gorman had issued from the office in which the interview had occurred, and now stood lighting another cigarette.

Something like five minutes later, Detective Coleman, loitering in a doorway on Broad Street, felt Boyd significantly touch his arm, and heard him quietly ask:

"Has Terry reported anything to you?"

Coleman, without turning, shook his head in the negative.

"Humph!" muttered Boyd, under his breath. "Plainly the vultures feel sure of themselves. Where is your man, Jimmie?"

"Yonder, just back of that group of curb brokers," muttered Coleman. "The man in a rain coat, with an umbrella thrust under his right arm."

"Very good, Jimmie. How long has he been there?"

"Ever since I arrived here."

"Capital! Now return to my office and wait till I come. It may be half-an-hour."

"Anything doing?"

"Too much to be told here."

Without once having glanced at Boyd, the detective walked away, while Boyd proceeded down Broad Street, crossing to the opposite side on reaching the end of the block. Then he returned up the street, gradually approaching the great gathering of brokers who throng the neighborhood of the Stock Exchange during business hours, and at the same time drawing nearer the man designated by Coleman.

Wykoff was standing on the curb, talking with a companion, and Boyd had no recollection of ever having seen him. Yet his face was one to be remembered. It was as dark as that of an Italian, with clean-cut, regular features, his jaw square, his lips firm, his nose straight, with the thin, sensitive nostrils of a thoroughbred.

It was rather a handsome face, and its every line indicated him to be a man of inflexible nerve, of indomitable will and courage, capable even of desperation. He appeared to be under forty, and was tall and well put together.

Presently his companion, with whom Boyd happened to be well acquainted, departed; and the latter then approached Wykoff from behind and touched him on the shoulder—an act which almost invariably will evoke from guilt and secret apprehension an involuntary betrayal. In this instance, the crafty ruse utterly failed, however, for Wykoff turned about with the utmost composure, and fixed a pair of piercing black eyes on the face of the ostensible Hebrew.

"I peg your pardon," said Boyd, with an insinuating combination of servility and politeness. "Are you Mr. Vykoff?"

A smile curled the thin lips of the man addressed.

"Wykoff, my friend, not Vykoff," he slowly answered.

with a drollness that did not affect the hard, metallic-like ring of his steady voice. "Yes, I am Mr. Wykoff. What can I do for you?"

"I am looking for a man named Penson—Mr. Frank Penson," Boyd glibly explained, with a series of characteristic Hebrew gestures. "Maype you can tell me vair he has gone, as I was told you were vith him over in Vall Street a short time ago."

Paul Wykoff listened to this without a change of countenance.

"Benson, my friend, not Penson, is that gentleman's name," he replied, still smiling, still with that curiously cold ring in his deliberate voice.

"Penson—that's what I said," nodded Boyd. "You haf seen him lately?"

"Why, yes; I saw him something like an hour ago," answered Wykoff, with some display of frankness. "I talked with him for a few minutes in the vestibule of the new Howard building, but I cannot say where he went from there. I have not seen him since."

"I vould like to find him."

"Why don't you call at his place of business, then, if you wish to see him?"

"Vair is that, please?"

"At the office of Curry, Gale & Fiske, bankers, over in Wall Street. You probably will find him there."

"I'm opliged to you, Mr. Vykoff, greatly opliged," cried Boyd, with repeated bows. "Gurry, Cale & Viske, eh? I vill seek him there. I'm opliged to you, Mr. Vykoff."

"Not at all, sir," Wykoff indifferently answered, turning away to gaze at a group of brokers in the street, whose sudden animation seemed to interest him.

Boyd now walked quickly away, furtively observing that Wykoff did not once turn to gaze after him. If he had had any hand in the robbery committed that morning, he now was certainly displaying, Boyd decided, a most extraordinary nerve.

And it went far to convince the latter that the criminals, assuming Wykoff to be one, were operating upon well-laid plans, and felt themselves equal to any emergency.

After rounding the nearest corner, Boyd turned back and cautiously watched Wykoff for nearly twenty minutes. The result was the same. Never a doubtful move; never a suspicious glance in any direction; never the slightest betrayal of secret misgivings or suppressed apprehension.

"Certainly a cool star!" said Boyd to himself, with a last glance at him before returning to his office.

III.

Superficially regarded, the investigations made by Mr. Felix Boyd would not have given promise of any very startling or profitable results. They possessed at least one virtue, however, in that they had occupied him rather less than two hours, so that no great time had been lost in event of the ultimate total failure of his efforts.

It was not quite two o'clock when he returned to his Pine Street office, where he quickly removed his disguise, and informed Coleman what further designs he had in view. These matured less than an hour later, or just before three o'clock.

Then, at the head of a dozen policemen in uniform, and several plain-clothes men from the central office, Boyd again entered the Howard building, where, disregarding the amazement of the workmen who observed this threatening invasion, he led the posse of officers straight to the basement.

There was an ugly look on his strong, forceful face when, thrusting aside one of the contractors who then was present, and who had hastened to accost him, he cried sharply to the troop of officers at his heels:

"Now spread yourselves, my men! Begin out yonder and work this way. Search every nook and corner of the place. Don't leave a stone unturned—not a stone! Arrest any man thought to be a crook, or whose actions are at all suspicious. Out that way, first, all of you, and don't miss crack nor crevice!"

While loudly giving these commands, Boyd again observed the boss mason, Mr. Gorman, still supervising the laying of the floors in the front offices; and, strange

as it may seem, Boyd scattered his followers in the—opposite direction.

The contractor mentioned now asserted his authority by clutching Boyd by the arm, and angrily demanded:

"What's the meaning of this, sir? Why do you come here in this way, and——"

"It means that there are crooks about here, and that we want them," interrupted Boyd sharply. "We're going to search the place. There's a warrant, if you care to read it. If you wish to know more, go and ask Sergeant Kelly yonder, and don't bother me. Look lively, there!"

The contractor seized the warrant and rushed away after the policeman indicated, whereupon Boyd wheeled sharp about and strode toward the front offices, as if to give them his personal inspection. At the same time, he cried sternly to the startled workmen who were issuing into the dimly lighted corridor:

"Get back to your labors, my men, every one of you. This is no affair of yours, and you'll be wise if you stick to your work. It'll be time for you to quit when you're asked to do so, and that'll be soon enough. Get back to your work, I say."

His authoritative manner served to awe the laborers, and they drew back from the corridor as he strode along, which presently brought him nearer the man he had interviewed that morning, and within a few feet of the office in which the interview had occurred.

"What's the trouble, mister?" Gorman ventured to ask, tossing away a half-burned cigarette. "Something wrong?"

"Wrong enough!" cried Boyd, halting and looking back as if to ensure that his commands were being properly executed. "There's been a robbery committed, and a lot of bonds stolen. We have evidence that crooks are about here, and the stuff still in the building. We'll turn every stone, too, but what we'll find them. Who are you, sir?"

The question came quick and sharp, but Gorman did not flinch a hair's breadth.

"I'm a boss mason here," he replied. "Been here since the work began."

"Oh, is that so? You're all right, then!" cried Boyd, with a toss of his head. "It's among the laborers that we're after our game. We suspect that one or more crooks have worked their way in here and done this job, and now have hidden the——"

While he spoke, he had raised his hand to his hat, a prearranged signal, and what more he might have said was interrupted by loud cries from the farther end of the corridor, where most of the policemen then were located.

"Look out, there! Stop him, Boyd! Stop that man!"

These were the vociferous cries, and at the same moment a roughly clad fellow, none other than Jimmie Coleman, however, came plunging down the dim corridor at breakneck speed. He appeared to be making for the stairs, and was closely pursued by two of the policemen, who were uttering the above cries.

Boyd seemed to take in the situation at a glance. He muttered an oath, then sprang up the corridor to head Coleman off. As he did so, he flashed one backward glance at Gorman, and saw him slink quickly toward the office in which they had met that morning, as if his interest there was greater than in the excitement outside. Yet, without pausing, Boyd ran a rod or more up the corridor, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Look out for him, boys! He's turning back! Down the side passage—that way! that way! I'll look out for these stairs!"

Then he turned sharply around and looked back. Gorman had disappeared.

The confusion in the corridors during these few moments was like that of bedlam.

With movements as quick and agile as those of a leopard, Felix Boyd darted back, hurled aside a workman who came from one of the offices, and in a moment he had reached the doorway of the room abutting the street vestibule. There was but one occupant of the room.

Mr. Gorman, the boss mason, was upon his knees on the tessellated floor. With a chisel he had pried up one of the square stone slabs in the south corner, and from a cavity beneath it was at that moment taking—the package of stolen bonds!"

"Good enough, Mr. Gorman!" cried Boyd, in ringing tones, as he strode into the room. "So you are the man, precisely as I suspected! Let me have them, if you please!"

Gorman came to his feet like a man electrified. He realized instantly the ruse by which he had been duped.

His convulsed features grew as white as marble, and for the bare fraction of a second he shrank and hesitated.

Then, without a word, but as quick as a flash, he drew a revolver and fired pointblank at Felix Boyd's head.

Boyd saw his move and ducked, the bullet crashing against the wall behind him; then he sprang forward to grapple with the criminal, whom he was particularly anxious to secure alive.

But Gorman darted to one side, dropping the bonds upon the floor, and again raised his weapon and fired. This time its report was mingled with that of a revolver in the hand of Jimmie Coleman, now at the open door; and the detective's bullet found its mark.

For Gorman threw both hands into the air, gave one convulsive upward leap, and then pitched face forward to the floor, shot through the head.

"Good God, Jimmie!" exclaimed Boyd, aghast, for a moment. "You have killed him!"

"Can't help it," said Coleman bluntly. "It looked like him or you. Have you turned the trick?"

"Just as I anticipated," cried Boyd, signing for the officers now at the door to disperse the gathering crowd. "Send those people about their business, sergeant, and despatch one of your men for the ambulance. Meantime, we'll see how nearly I have hit the nail on the head."

He caught up Gorman's chisel while speaking, and with it proceeded to rip out a portion of the sheathing against the vestibule wall.

It came away quite easily, disclosing the bare stone wall, a close examination of which plainly revealed the method by which the robbery had been accomplished.

With the chisel Boyd quickly loosened and removed a small, narrow block of stone, so carefully ground and neatly fitted that it joined the others in a way that fairly precluded detection from outside.

An aperture then was disclosed through which a man's hands and arms could easily be thrust, and which opened directly above the lower step of the vestibule, precisely where the banker's clerk had placed his bag of securities.

"There you are, Jimmie!" cried Boyd coolly. "It's as plain as the nose on an elephant's face."

Then he stooped to pick up the package of bonds, and, taking Coleman's arm, he quietly added, with a glance at the lifeless man on the floor: "Look after that fellow, Jimmie, and then slip around to my office. Say nothing at all about Wykoff, whom it is vain to attempt involving in this job, as I presently will show you. See me a little later."

Coleman readily nodded, and Felix Boyd at once made his way through the crowd at the door, and about ten minutes later entered Fiske's office and coolly tossed the package of securities upon the banker's desk.

"There are your bonds, Mr. Fiske," said he, complacently. "I think you will find them all right."

Fiske uttered a cry of amazement, and sprang to his feet.

"Good heavens, Boyd!" he exclaimed. "You're a wonder! And the man who stole them?"

"The man who stole them is now on his way to the morgue," said Boyd coolly. "He played his little game, and has paid the price."

For reasons of his own, Boyd did not impart many of the particulars, and when he was about to go he was asked by the grateful banker:

"Now, what do I owe you, Mr. Boyd? Make your own price, I beg. Say, what do I owe you?"

Boyd's answer possibly may suggest his relations with some of the great financiers of that locality, the precise nature of which cannot wisely be disclosed.

"You owe me nothing, Mr. Fiske," he replied, smiling. "I am paid by the year, sir, not by the job. It may be a year, you know, before I have another job of this kind."

In his own office, a little later, Boyd explained to Coleman the occasion of his caution regarding Wykoff, as well as the shrewd deductions from which he so successfully had worked the case.

"It was curious, in a way, yet not so very obscure," said he. "Benson's habit of taking bonds to the sub-treasury evidently was known to Wykoff, who very probably had been informed by Fiske's stenographer, Miss Dole. The fact that the amount to-day was larger than usual, when such a theft would be most profitable, at once convinced me that a conspiracy existed between Wykoff and Miss Dole. It was plain that the girl had not personally removed the bonds, and I at once decided that she had signaled to Wykoff from her window, informing him that Benson was about going out with a valuable package.

"Now note what care Wykoff had prepared for this patiently awaited opportunity. He knew just what course Benson would probably take, and he proceeded to intercept him at the Howard building, already having planned the scheme with Gorman, whose authority as a boss mason had enabled him to secretly fix things for the job.

"Wykoff probably hastened there and signaled Gorman to be ready, perhaps by tapping on the basement window. That Gorman had been in the habit of awaiting this signal was evident from the cigarette stubs which he had carelessly left on the floor of the office abutting the vestibule, and which also indicated that he personally had been at work there, where the job was to be done.

"Upon meeting Benson, Wykoff easily urged him into the vestibule, and by curious chance Benson must have set his bag down precisely on the spot desired. Otherwise Wykoff would have found some excuse for carelessly moving it. He then took a position directly in front of Benson, whose attention he briefly diverted from the bag, and began drumming on the step with the end of his umbrella, making a noise which Gorman probably heard and understood, and which served also to hide any slight sounds made by Gorman when removing the stone and opening the bag. The ground-glass windows of the office prevented Gorman's being seen from the street, and doubtless Wykoff spread open his long rain coat to hide the manipulation of the bag. I began to suspect this the moment Benson stated that Wykoff stood directly in front of him, and kept up a continuous tapping with his umbrella."

"I see," nodded Coleman.

"To remove the bonds, rebuckle the bag, and then replace the sliding stone, was the work of a minute only," continued Boyd. "The gold was shrewdly left in the bag, that the weight of it might lead Benson to suppose that the bag had not been touched. Hence, when the loss was discovered, it would be impossible for Benson to positively state just when and where the theft had been committed, which would seriously complicate matters. I was convinced, however, assuming that Benson told the truth, that the robbery was done then and there. Possibly, if Gorman had been detected by Benson, even a more desperate move would have been made."

"Very likely," admitted Coleman. "I don't quite see, however, why Gorman hid the bonds, instead of making away with them."

Boyd laughed.

"I will tell you why," said he. "In case Benson at once discovered his loss, an inquiry in the building might have been quickly instituted. Gorman, therefore, took no chance of inviting suspicion by leaving the building, or of being arrested with the bonds on his person. He also was compelled to remain for a time, in order to replace the sheathing."

"That is true."

"So Gorman hid the bonds, until he could safely remove them. I felt very sure of this, Jimmie, so I suggested making a colossal bluff of searching the place, in the hope of alarming Gorman into an attempt to remove his booty. You saw how well it succeeded."

"Rather!"

"I picked up most of these clues very quickly," added Boyd; "and when Wykoff, after I accosted him in a way that must have told him he was suspected, showed no apprehension and no signs of attempting to communicate with Gorman, I was convinced that the scamps had their plans so well laid that they felt sure of themselves, and that some unexpected move must be made for the immediate recovery of the bonds. That is my special line, you know, rather than that of securing criminals."

"Yes, I know," growled Coleman. "But I don't see why you still oppose the arrest of Wykoff and that girl."

"I should do so, Jimmie, if you had not killed Gorman," said Boyd. "He was our chief witness, for we might have forced a confession from him. But, as the affair now stands, we have no absolute case against Wykoff and Miss Dole. They easily can deny an acquaintance, and Wykoff can swear that his meeting with Benson was purely casual, that he never saw or heard of Gorman, and that the latter must have done the job alone or with the help of unknown parties. We could not absolutely prove the contrary, despite the circumstantial evidence."

"Humph! I guess you are right, Mr. Felix Boyd."

"No, no, Jimmie, there is nothing in arresting Wykoff at present. He will know that he is suspected of a hand in this job, but he certainly is a shrewd and nervy knave, and doubtless sees his way clearly, particularly since Gorman has gone under. We yet may bring him to the ringbolt, however, for I rather feel that we have not seen the last of him. Later, I must give Fiske a quiet tip to get rid of his stenographer."

"By all means."

"In my opinion, Jimmie," concluded Boyd, reaching for his pipe, "we have dealt with only a subordinate or a hireling, not the master. Mark me, Jimmie, the master is not yet known to us. He is a much greater and more clever knave than we know. My word for it, we have not heard the last of him."

In this Mr. Felix Boyd was right, as subsequent accounts of his remarkable work will disclose.

The Case of Dickson's Diamonds.

I.

"No, Jimmie, the burglar of to-day is not the burglar of a generation or two ago," said Felix Boyd, through a wreath of pipe smoke. "He is not the burly midnight ruffian at mere fancy of whom we shuddered in our trundle-beds, the bearded fellow in rough attire and sinister mask, with a kit of tools under his coat and a brace of Smith & Wesson's in his hip pockets, whose chief attribute was brute force, and who cracked with equal complacency a merchant's safe or the merchant's skull."

Jimmie Coleman laughed, knocking the ashes from his cigar, and nodded approvingly.

This central office man was Boyd's very intimate friend and most ardent admirer, probably the latter because he knew much more of Boyd's remarkable talents than any other man, so was best able to appreciate his extraordinary abilities.

He had dropped into Boyd's office in Pine Street half-an-hour before, merely to enjoy a morning smoke in genial company.

"You are right, Felix," said he. "Things have changed mightily in that respect since we wore a frock and knickerbockers."

"Instead, Jimmie," added Boyd, in ruminating mood, "we have to-day the much more intelligent and dangerous scamp, who forms and executes his designs with exquisite cunning and sagacity, and who employs every modern mechanical device with which to overcome the constantly improving safeguards he encounters. The transition has been gradual, but is very pronounced, and the detective art has undergone a corresponding change."

"That is true, too, Felix."

"The successful sleuth of to-day, Jimmie, besides possessing the dogged persistency and brute courage of old, must be a man of broad intelligence, a keen observer, and subtle analyst, and one capable of discerning remote relations. The detection of obscure bits of evidence, and the art of making correct deductions therefrom, chiefly serve to solve the great criminal mysteries of the present day."

"Time and again, Felix, you have demonstrated that," nodded Coleman. "Witness that bond robbery of Curry, Gale & Fiske last November. By the way, I see that that man Wykoff, whom you suspected of having had a hand in that affair, is again operating on the curb."

Boyd smiled oddly, and laid away his pipe.

"Wykoff, as I remarked at that time, was not the master knave in that affair," said he. "Take my word for it, Jimmie, there was another Richmond somewhere in the field. That ingenious robbery was not designed by Paul Wykoff, but by some much more capable and far-reaching knave."

"Do you still think so?"

"I do, indeed," said Boyd, with noticeable gravity. "It is my impression, Jimmie, that something seriously wrong exists down here below the 'Dead-Line.'"

"Why do you think so?"

"Don't ask me why; the grounds for my misgivings are still vague and indefinite. Yet I seriously believe that, somewhere in this wealthy locality, where millions change hands with each passing business hour, somewhere in the very heart of our great financial maelstrom, there exists a veritable genius for crime."

"A genius for crime?" echoed Coleman.

"A man whose obscure personality may be only vaguely discerned behind crafty operations executed by others, yet directed by him with all the evil ingenunity and consummate foresight of a master of knavery. I see only vague signs of this at present, Jimmie, now and then cropping out in crimes of new and peculiar originality, all of which point to a masterful and malignant genius hid in the background. As yet I have been unable to get the least definite line upon him; but some day I shall do so. Some day, Jimmie, one of these peculiar crimes will

give me a clue to this master knave, who, I believe, lurks about here like a spider in its web, and conspires with and directs a well-organized gang of——”

“Easy!” put in Coleman, lifting his forefinger. “There are steps in the corridor. Some one is coming this way.”

A stranger unceremoniously entered. He was about fifty years of age, stoutly built, and his pale face and dilated eyes at once indicated exceeding nervousness and excitement.

“I am looking for Mr. Boyd—Mr. Felix Boyd,” he said quickly, with restless glances at each of his hearers. “Do I find him here?”

Boyd reached for his pipe, at the same time signing the stranger to a chair.

“I am Felix Boyd,” said he. “Take a seat, sir.”

“In a moment, just a moment,” nervously rejoined the stranger, hastening to produce a card. “I am Nathan Dickson, of Maiden Lane, dealer in diamonds, and the American agent for some of the largest diamond merchants of London and Amsterdam. My card, Mr. Boyd.”

“Thank you,” murmured Boyd, with his keen, gray eyes half hidden under their drooping lids. “And what, pray, can I do for you, Mr. Dickson?”

“I come to you from my bankers, who told me that, if I but mentioned their name, you would readily advise me,” Dickson quickly exclaimed, mentioning one of the largest banking-houses in Vall Street. “I have been a depositor with them for nearly twenty years, Mr. Boyd, and they advised me to consult you, sir, instead of going to the central office, as I at first was inclined.”

These references to the bankers served at once to ensure Boyd's interest, for reasons hinted at in an earlier narrative. He laid down his pipe without having lighted it, and again waved his visitor to a chair.

“You do not know me by name, I take it,” said Dickson, as he sat down.

“Only since seeing your card,” said Boyd. “I observe, however, that you are a married man, and very near-sighted.”

“Dear me! How is that? Do I wear my heart on my sleeve?”

"Hardly that," smiled Boyd. "But a spot has been sponged from your vest this morning, presumably by your wife, since you scarce could have visited your tailor thus early; and I notice the handle of a reading-glass protruding slightly from your inside pocket."

That one of these deductions did not affect Dickson very pleasantly was apparent in his increased nervousness, and the sudden trembling of his hands on his knees; yet he laughed a little, and cried:

"Oh, yes, quite right; you are quite right, Mr. Boyd. I am very near-sighted, very, when viewing objects close at hand. Yet I do not even require glasses for observing things at a distance."

"That is occasionally the case, I understand."

"I am told so. Yet I believe that very few are as sorely afflicted as I. I can read only with a very powerful glass, as you may see."

And he now displayed his reading-glass, a thick lens nearly six inches in diameter, having a silver rim and an ebony handle. Boyd merely glanced at it, then turned to Coleman, who had risen.

"Drop in a little later, Jimmie," said he. "I imagine that Mr. Dickson will not long engage me."

"No, Mr. Boyd, not very long," said Dickson, when they were alone. "I received in my mail this morning a letter which gives me great uneasiness, if not serious alarm. I took it to my bankers for advice, scarce knowing what else to do, and they advised me to consult you. I wish you would examine the letter; here it is, and tell me what you think of it, and how seriously I should regard it. I am tempted to place it in the hands of the police for investigation."

Boyd examined the letter with interest, and was immediately struck with its peculiarities.

It neither was written nor printed in the ordinary way. Instead, each word had been cut singly from some book or newspaper, evidently with a penknife, and then pasted on a blank sheet of paper.

Plainly the work had been very carefully done, yet it had been found so delicate that the completed lines presented considerable irregularity, with the separate words differently spaced and slanted at various angles.

The communication thus conveyed was quite brief, and read as follows:

"NATHAN DICKSON, Maiden Lane: You look out for yourself. Persons I dare not name are about to execute a design against you, the character of which I cannot safely disclose. I am a friend to you, and this is a warning you will not wisely ignore. Heed it. Guard yourself and that most dear to you."

Boyd twice read this curious missive, then looked up at the grave face of his waiting visitor.

"Have you the cover in which this was mailed?" he asked.

"Yes, here it is," bowed Dickson, tendering the envelope.

"Printed with a pen," observed Boyd; "and dropped in one of the street boxes late yesterday afternoon. Evidently the sender designed this method to prevent being traced by his handwriting."

"That is apparent," cried Dickson nervously. "But what of the letter itself? It has given me a dreadful shock. My nerves are completely unstrung. It is so indefinite, yet in a way so threatening. I don't know whether my life is in danger, or my property, or what. I am all of a tremble from head to foot."

"Which really is very foolish of you," said Boyd indifferently. "I do not think your life is in any danger, Mr. Dickson. Are you a man of much property?"

"Bradstreet rates me at a hundred thousand, which is rather more than I possess," replied Dickson more composedly. "I own a modest summer place near Jamaica Bay, where I dwell for about six months of the year, renting a house in town during the winter."

"At present you are where?"

"I am still living in town."

"You do a large business in diamonds?"

"Quite so. As agent for foreign houses; moreover, I carry a valuable stock."

"In part consigned to you, I presume," observed Boyd, raising his brows.

"Yes, certainly."

"Do you consider your quarters in Maiden Lane, and

the safe or vault in which you store your goods, perfectly secure against burglars?" inquired Boyd.

"Indeed, yes!" exclaimed Dickson. "I never felt otherwise."

Boyd smiled, and again glanced at the patchwork letter."

"Who among your friends, Mr. Dickson, is a practical joker?" he asked, a bit dryly.

"Really I recall none."

"Yet this letter is, in my opinion, the work of such a person."

"A joke—a practical joke! Sent only to annoy or alarm me!" exclaimed Dickson, with much eagerness.

"Do you really think so, Mr. Boyd? Indeed, I shall feel greatly relieved if that is your opinion. Do you really think so, Mr. Boyd?"

Plainly, his relief already was great, and Boyd at once proceeded to further assure him.

"I think, Mr. Dickson," said he decisively, "that any true friend, so anxious to warn you of serious danger, could easily have found a way to intelligently do so without imperiling himself. The greater your danger, sir, the greater probability of such a step on the part of a friend, who surely would have left you in no such uncertainty as this concerning his meaning."

"I had not thought of it in that light," cried Dickson. "Really, Mr. Boyd, I begin to think you are right."

"To go a step farther," added Boyd; "if knaves contemplate any secret design upon you, certainly no such warning as this would have prefaced the execution of their project. Such a step on their part would be absurd."

"Surely."

"That, Mr. Dickson, is my opinion of this piece of indefinite patchwork."

"You believe it to be a practical joke?"

"Nothing more serious, sir."

"What would you advise me to do about it?"

"Nothing at all," declared Boyd promptly. "I should give it no further attention. I am convinced that no friend sent it to you; and such a communication from an enemy surely would be unworthy one's serious considera-

tion. If I were you, Mr. Dickson, I should toss the letter into my waste-basket, and not give it another thought."

A noteworthy change had come over the dealer in diamonds. His eyes were brighter, his cheeks flushed with satisfaction, and a smile had dispelled the manifest apprehensions with which he had entered Boyd's office.

He now shook the latter warmly by the hand, effusively uttering his thanks, and declaring that his own opinion of the mysterious letter was entirely changed, and that he now should completely disregard it.

When Mr. Dickson was about arising to go, however, Boyd carelessly observed:

"If you will leave the letter with me until after noon, Mr. Dickson, I will examine it more closely a little later, in case any obscure features of consequence have escaped me. Should I discover any, I will hasten to inform and advise you."

"Certainly," cried Dickson readily. "I shall be glad to leave it."

"I have your business card," said Boyd. "In case I should wish to reach you at home, which is not very probable, you had better leave me your up-town address. Write it on this blank, if you like. Here is a pencil."

Dickson again drew out his lens, holding it in his left hand while he wrote with the other, and bowing his head nearly to the paper on which he inscribed the desired address.

"There it is, Mr. Boyd," said he, arising. "I am always at home evenings. My wife and children are my chief comfort and delight. Call some evening, if you will, when not upon business. A thousand thanks for your opinion and advice. My bankers tell me that you invariably are right in such matters. You cannot imagine how much you have relieved me."

Boyd smiled, and shook his proffered hand, bowing him to the office door, where he bade him good morning.

When Jimmie Coleman entered a little later, he found Boyd at the window still studying the letter; and the latter at once confided to him the occasion of Dickson's visit.

"And what do you really make of this, Felix?" inquired Coleman, curiously examining the letter.

Boyd laughed softly, with an odd gleam in one corner of his eye.

"Make of it, Jimmie?" said he. "Not very much more than I told Dickson. Still, it presents a few curious features. Notice that each word was cut from some book or paper."

"That's very evident."

"Now place the face of the page against the window-pane, so that the light strikes through it. You find that you then can decipher the printing on the reverse side of the page from which the word in the letter was carefully cut."

"So I can, for a fact."

"Under the word 'design,' in the letter, you find *Fr* 'descant,' in small italics."

"Yes, it is quite plain."

"Under the word 'execute,' in the letter, you find the two words—'to exert.' Plainly, Jimmie, those two words, as well as the italics noted, formed parts of the definitions of the two words 'descant' and 'exertion,' on the reverse page from which the words 'design' and 'execute' were cut by the sender of this letter."

"Eureka!" cried Coleman. "It's dead open and shut, Felix, that the words of this letter were cut from an ordinary dictionary."

"Certainly it is, Jimmie," laughed Boyd; then he added, rather dryly: "Very possibly, Jimmie, I some day shall discover the dictionary from which they were cut."

Yet Mr. Felix Boyd gave the matter very little immediate attention. That afternoon he returned the letter to Dickson, at his store in Maiden Lane, stating that he found nothing in it to warrant serious apprehensions, and he left the dealer in diamonds quite assured that his earlier fears were entirely groundless.

Boyd next called upon Dickson's bankers, who stated that the latter was a man of sterling integrity, whose word was as good as his bond, and that his family comprised a wife and seven charming children.

So Boyd let the matter drop, to take its own course, whether up or down, and ten days passed before the crash came. Then, as he was about going out to lunch one day,

a policeman came rushing into his Pine Street office, crying excitedly:

"I say, Mr. Boyd! You are wanted down in Maiden Lane at once."

"By whom, Gaffney?" Boyd coolly inquired.

"By Jimmie Coleman, sir! There's the devil to pay in the store of Nathan Dickson, the diamond dealer."

II.

It was but a little after noon, with the sun shining unusually hot from a clear May sky, when Felix Boyd reached Maiden Lane and joined Coleman in front of Dickson's place of business. The store was a small one, occupying only the ground floor of a narrow brick building, that was wedged in between two much more imposing stone structures, looking much as if it had slipped in between such massive neighbors by some freak or mischance.

The single, broad window was protected with high wooden shutters, and the store door guarded with a stout iron grating, then closed and secured with a padlock. On a card tacked on the shutter of the door was rudely printed

OPEN THURSDAY MORNING.

It being Wednesday, the card and the closed store plainly indicated that Dickson had planned to be absent for a day, and had left a notice when he should return.

On the street fronting the store was a crowd of spectators, kept back by several policemen, and Boyd found Coleman and an officer engaged in forcing the iron grating guarding the closed door.

"What's the trouble, Jimmie?" he added, as he joined him.

The central office man quickly looked up on hearing Boyd's voice.

"Ah, you're here! Good enough!" he exclaimed. "Recalling that letter, I hastened to send for you. I'm told there has been an explosion in here, a devil of a

noise, and that Dickson has gone to his summer home for the day. I happened along just after the explosion was heard, and found Gibson, who occupies the upper floors, trying to get in here."

Boyd glanced at a tall, elderly man, who nodded in corroboration of Coleman's explanation. Boyd quickly asked:

"Did Dickson tell you he should be absent to-day, Mr. Gibson?"

"He did, sir, as he was closing up last night. He said he was going to his summer place to-day, to plan for occupying it a little later."

"Does he employ no clerks here, who could have kept the store open?"

"None, sir. He runs his business alone. I greatly fear that robbery has been committed here. The explosion occurred about ten minutes ago, and was very severe, fairly shaking the upper floors."

Boyd glanced quickly at the window. An inner curtain, drawn below the tops of the window shutters outside, prevented a view of the interior of the store.

"Have you looked out back, Jimmie?" he demanded quickly.

"Yes, first thing," cried Coleman. "The way is through that alley, and the back window is closed with an iron shutter on hinges, secured inside the shop. There is a round hole in it through which I looked, but the smoke in the store obscured everything. There has been an explosion in there all right, but I saw no signs of thieves in the rear area, which lies a bit lower than the street. I tried to force a small cellar door back there, but it wouldn't give a hair, so I returned to tackle this one. Ah, now we're in!"

The iron grating finally had given way, and fell clanging upon the sidewalk. With an iron bar, Coleman then proceeded to force the lock of the door, an operation quickly accomplished, when he threw open the door and entered the shop.

Boyd quickly followed him, first glancing at one of the policemen, and saying sharply:

"Stand here, Gaffney! Let no one else enter!"

Though the smoke now was partly dispelled, the shop

was in semiobscurity, and Coleman hastened to raise the curtain. Then a flood of light entered over the front shutters, and revealed the devastation within.

The shop was narrow, but quite deep, with a counter at one side, and a small enclosed office in front. Nearly at the rear was a large safe, partly fixed in the side wall, and fronted by an open space near the rear window.

A glance about the place quickly told what had happened. The heavy door of the safe lay on the floor, and a part of the side nearest the rear window was badly shattered, leaving the interior compartments of the safe almost entirely exposed and easy of access. That they had been robbed of the most of their valuable contents was at once apparent.

Furthermore, indicating the violence of the explosion, the counter was thrown awry, and the glass of the rear window was scattered in fragments over the floor, leaving only the secured iron shutter, through the round aperture in which entered a beam of sunlight from the rear area or yard.

On the broad sill of this window lay a large reading-glass, similar to that which Dickson carried on his person; but of Dickson himself, or of the knaves guilty of perpetrating this midday burglary, there was not a sign.

"Whew!" whistled Coleman, the instant his gaze fell upon the scene. "Here's a mess! A burglary in broad daylight!"

"Burglary, indeed!" exclaimed Boyd. "The crooks have made a clean sweep. This will settle me in Dickson's opinion. That patchwork letter of his had a wicked meaning, after all."

"I should say wicked!" cried Coleman, hurriedly opening the rear shutter, and springing out of the window. "I'll see what I can find out here, Felix."

"Go ahead!" cried Boyd. "I'll examine things in here."

Coleman returned in about five minutes, bearing in his hand a pair of soiled rubbers, with which he scrambled back through the window, remarking, rapidly:

"There are footprints in the soil of the alley, but not at all definite. Yet the crooks must have escaped by that

way, and one of them probably wore these rubbers, for I found them under some refuse near the alley exit."

"Very likely," said Boyd, glancing at them. "Burglars frequently wear them to muffle their steps indoors. Size eight, aren't they?"

A flight of stairs from one corner led to a dimly lighted cellar, to which Boyd quickly conducted his companion. At the foot of the stairs he halted, and pointed to a narrow door, the one Coleman vainly had tried to force from outside. Against it was a heavy piece of joist, one end of which was securely blocked several yards from the door.

"Humph!" ejaculated Coleman. "They went that way, and the timber shows how they secured the door after them. It was so adjusted as to fall into place when the door closed, and thus prevent the immediate entrance of any one anxious to learn the cause of the explosion. The delay gave the crooks a chance to get well away. They have done the job all right, covering their tracks well, and already have a long lead on the police. There's no question about that."

Boyd nodded indifferently, and led the way up-stairs. "You had better rush a message up to Dickson's wife, Jimmie," said he. "Here is his city address. Have her, or some of his family, telegraph to Dickson, and bring him here as quickly as possible. He should show up by the middle of the afternoon."

"I'll do so at once," nodded Coleman, hastening to the front door, where he not only started a messenger for Dickson's residence, but also despatched another to headquarters to report the extraordinary burglary.

When he returned he found Felix Boyd on his knees a few feet from the ruined safe, and between it and the rear window. He was intently engaged in studying, with the help of Dickson's large reading-glass, the hard pine boards of the bare floor.

"What have you discovered there?" Coleman demanded, with immediate interest.

"Nothing much," muttered Boyd, glancing up. "Only this smutty mark across the floor, Jimmie. It begins here, and ends at the corner of the safe."

"What do you make of it? What caused it?"

"It was caused by a fine fuse, Jimmie, with which the charge in the safe was exploded. In burning, it scorched the floor a little, making this almost imperceptible dark line. At first sight, I thought it was a narrow crack only, but this lens belonging to Dickson reveals its true character. Very kind of Dickson to have left a glass so handy."

There was in Boyd's voice an intonation so vaguely odd that it brought a look of perplexity to Coleman's attentive face. He could discern no more than had been pointed out to him, however, and he growled, a little impatiently:

"Well, what of it? What do you mean by that? We know the charge was exploded by some means, and what matters whether a fuse or an electric current was used?"

"It doesn't matter much, Jimmie," returned Boyd, still on his knees. "Yet I thought I would call your attention to the line. Here at this end of it is another feature, too, hardly discernible except with the glass."

"What's that?" inquired Coleman, stooping lower.

"Here are two curved lines, parallel and scarce a quarter inch apart," said Boyd, with his finger on the spot from which the fuse apparently had started. "They are very faint, almost like partly obliterated pencil marks. Can you see them, Jimmie? Here, take the glass."

"Yes, I can see them now," muttered Coleman, peering through the powerful lens. "But what of them?"

"Nothing of much consequence, I guess," Boyd slowly answered. "They appear to be faint scorches, like the other. It's odd, though, that both curve so regularly. Maybe they were caused by the flame of the match with which this end of the fuse was lighted. As you say, Jimmie, it doesn't matter much how it was done."

While he spoke, Boyd gazed oddly down at Coleman from the corner of his eye, but the latter's attention was upon the floor, which he still studied with the glass.

"I don't make anything of it, Felix," he presently declared, arising to his feet. "I have sent to headquarters for assistance. We must lose no more time before getting the police after these scoundrels."

"Quite right," nodded Boyd, taking the reading-glass and replacing it on the sill of the back window. "Since

I see nothing more that I can do for you here, Jimmie, I believe I will go and lunch. I was about going when you sent for me."

"Very well. I shall wait here until the chief comes down."

"By Jove! I feel very sorry for Dickson," added Boyd, as he turned to go. "He surely will set me down for a blockhead of the first water. Who would have believed that that infernal letter carried, between its deucedly crooked and patchwork lines, a hint at so audacious a crime as this? Yes, I feel very sorry for Dickson. I must run down here later in the day and try to square myself with him."

With which observation, to which Coleman made no reply, Mr. Felix Boyd passed out into Maiden Lane and departed.

The news of the extraordinary daylight burglary had spread rapidly, and a great gathering of people thronged the street. Reporters and artists were hurrying to the scene of the crime, and soon the chief from the central office, accompanied by several of his shrewdest subordinates, put in an appearance.

Long before evening the story of the burglary was known throughout the city, and all the powers of the police were being strenuously applied to tracking the burglars.

Late in the afternoon, Mr. Felix Boyd again visited the scene, expecting to find Dickson, and express his regrets over what had occurred. Nor was he disappointed, for Dickson had arrived at his store about three o'clock, well-nigh overwhelmed by the disaster befallen him. Boyd found him moaning and in tears, crushed under a despair much too great for expression, and he hastened to excuse as best he could his own obvious blindness.

"Oh, I don't blame you, Mr. Boyd; I don't blame you," Dickson tearfully reiterated, in response to Boyd's expressions of regret. "I'm ruined, utterly ruined, but I don't blame you, sir. No mortal man could have foreseen this from that blind letter. I am a victim of burglars, Mr. Boyd; and I feel sure that I have secret enemies, also, who are striving to undo me. I'm bankrupt, utterly ruined, but I don't blame you in the least."

"That's very kind of you, Dickson, I am sure," said Felix Boyd. "How great is your loss?"

"I cannot tell yet, not precisely," groaned Dickson. "Two hundred thousand at least, and probably more. Many of the diamonds were consignments only, and I never can make good for them, never! I am utterly ruined, but I don't blame you, sir. You advised me the best you knew."

"I certainly did, Dickson," said Boyd sorrowfully. "Were you at your shore house when informed of the burglary?"

"Yes. I went out there alone this morning to arrange for opening the house next week. I received a telegram from my wife, conveying the dreadful news, and I at once returned. God help me, Mr. Boyd, I'm a broken man from this hour. I never shall recover, never! But I don't blame you, sir; I don't blame you in the least."

III.

"Are you booked for anything special to-night, Jimmie?" inquired Felix Boyd of Coleman, in the afternoon of the second day following the burglary in Maiden Lane.

"Nothing more pressing than Dickson's affair."

"Have the detectives struck any trail worth following?"

"Not as yet. It's an infernally blind case," declared Coleman. "Do you know, Boyd, I begin to believe you are right, in suspecting that some master knave is at work in this locality."

Boyd laughed indifferently, and made no direct reply.

"You can let Dickson's case drop until to-morrow, Jimmie," said he. "I want you to make a night run into the suburbs with me, so meet me at the Thirty-fourth Street ferry at seven o'clock. You'll learn for what a little later. And by the way, Jimmie, you had better come in disguise, and have a gun with you!"

Coleman knew Boyd too well to attempt to hasten any disclosures. He merely signified his assent, and promptly

at seven o'clock the two men, both effectively disguised, met at the ferry mentioned.

Still Boyd disclosed nothing. He crossed the river with his companion, boarded a train at the Long Island railway station, and entered into conversation with Coleman until they reached South Woodhaven, some after dark. There they left the train, and Boyd soon was leading the way across the broad strip of country lying along the waters of Jamaica Bay, the salty air from which fanned their flushed faces.

"What the dickens are you after out here?" Coleman finally ventured to demand, with some impatience.

Boyd laughed, and quietly rejoined:

"I am after Dickson's burglars, Jimmie."

"The devil you say!"

"Easy! We are nearing our destination, and must not be seen nor heard. Still, I believe we are well in advance of our quarry, who possibly may not show up at all. Yet I would bet that somebody will put in an appearance, in which case I must know what sort of a trick is to be turned here to-night. Carefully now, and come this way. Yonder is Dickson's place."

They had emerged from a narrow strip of woods, and in the near distance the dark outlines of a commodious wooden dwelling, with a stable somewhat removed, were discernible against the starry sky. The isolated place was shrouded in gloom, and the solitude and silence were broken only by crickets and insects in the long grass, or the occasional cry of some night bird overhead.

Closely followed by Coleman, Boyd skirted a hedge until he arrived at a point back of the stable, to the rear wall of which he cautiously stole and listened. It was as silent as a tomb within, and Boyd next forced open the sliding wooden shutter of a square window, used only for removing refuse.

This gave them easy access to the interior, and Boyd, with a whispered word of caution, led the way in, and closed the shutter. This left them in Egyptian darkness, but Boyd quickly produced an electric pocket lantern, with which he shed a single beam of light across the floor.

"We are here first, Jimmie, and possibly last," he softly

remarked. "I don't look for others before the next train comes out, yet we'd best be quiet and cautious. Come this way for a moment, however. There is a contrivance here which I wish to show you. I never saw anything just like it."

"Evidently you've been here before," muttered Coleman, not a little puzzled.

"Only once," replied Boyd. "That was yesterday. Here's the thing I spoke of."

It appeared to be only a barrel, placed upright on a mound of loose hay, directly under the edge of the overhanging mow just above. Boyd quietly removed the perforated head, however, and flashed a beam of light into the barrel, revealing several startling facts.

There was no lower head in the barrel, which stood squarely on the loose hay, and contained a number of crumpled pages, evidently torn from some book. Precisely in the middle of the barrel, and fixed upright in the loose hay and paper at the bottom, was a partly burned paraffin candle.

"Good heavens!" muttered Coleman. "What's the meaning of this? Is it a contrivance for firing the barn?"

"Precisely," whispered Felix Boyd. "Clever, isn't it? Had the candle burned low enough to ignite the hay and loose papers, the whole place would speedily have been in a blaze, entirely destroying this incriminating evidence. Note the craftiness of it. The barrel hoods the light, precluding observation from outside, and prevents a draft from extinguishing the candle. Very long candles of this kind can easily be obtained, long enough to burn for twelve hours. How easy for an incendiary to fire a stable in this way, and deny having been near it for a day at least."

"Infernally clever!" muttered Coleman. "The candle is about half burned out. Who can have extinguished it?"

"I did," laughed Boyd. "I happened out here yesterday morning, and found it burning. I have an idea that the would-be incendiary will show up later, to learn why his scheme failed, and to plant a second candle."

"Good heavens, Boyd, whom do you suspect of this?"

"Dickson fears that he has secret enemies, and it may be their work," said Boyd dryly. "Possibly we shall learn. Have a look at this loose page, Jimmie. What do you make of it?"

"By all the gods, Boyd, it is a leaf from a dictionary!"

"The dictionary from which Dickson's patch-work letter was made," chuckled Boyd. "Quiet, dear fellow! There's no knowing when visitors may arrive. I'll replace this head, and it will be assumed that the candle accidentally expired, possibly being averse to such infamous knavery as arson. That's as we found it. Now to cover, Jimmie, for a long and silent wait."

In the intense gloom of the stable, they patiently waited, minute after minute, never speaking, oftentimes scarce breathing, until nearly two hours had passed.

Then their tireless vigil was rewarded, and the supreme cleverness of Mr. Felix Boyd clearly demonstrated. A side door of the stable was quietly opened, and a man bearing a dark lantern cautiously entered.

He listened for several moments, then approached the barrel and examined it. Then he removed the partly burned candle, and got another, fully twenty-four inches long, from a stall near by.

This he adjusted in the barrel, as before, then struck a match and lighted it. As he did so, bending above the open barrel, the two watchers saw that he was a stout fellow, with red hair and beard. Having lighted the candle, he replaced the perforated barrel head, and stole out of the stable by the way he had entered.

Boyd laid a warning hand on Coleman's arm, checking him until the incendiary had closed and locked the door. Then he murmured, softly:

"This way, Jimmie! this way. Carefully—not a sound!"

Moving quickly, yet with the utmost caution, they opened the rear window, and reached the ground outside. Then Boyd led the way around the stable, hugging the side wall, and gazed toward Dickson's house. The incendiary, barely discernible in the darkness, was then emerging from a shed near the dwelling, around the corner of which he quickly disappeared.

"*After him*, Jimmie!" whispered Boyd. "Quietly!"

Both started across the open grounds, but had covered hardly a rod when the night air was rent with such a wild shriek for help that their blood fairly curdled. Then came a pistol-shot, instantly followed by another and another.

A muttered oath broke from Boyd, and his face grew hard as flint.

"By God, the game is off!" he fiercely cried, rushing toward the corner of the house, around which the bearded man had disappeared. "This way, Jimmie. Use your gun! Drop any man you lay eyes on!"

His voice rang like a trumpet on the night, and was echoed by startling cries from beyond the dwelling. As Boyd turned the corner of it, three men were fairly flying across the grounds, and already nearing the strip of woods previously mentioned. A fourth man, the one with a red beard, lay prostrate on the earth, shot through the breast, and breathing his last.

Boyd followed the three men, firing shot after shot at them as he ran; but the darkness prevented any accuracy, and within half-a-minute all three had vanished in the woods. Pursuit obviously would have proven only vain, and Boyd dashed back to look after their victim.

He found Coleman raising the stricken man, who was bleeding profusely from a gaping wound in his right breast; and as Boyd kneeled beside him, ghastly enough in the starlight, the dying man drew his final breath, gasping, with a last convulsive effort:

"Wy—wy—wy——"

Then he was gone, with the unfinished phrase or word, perhaps, silenced on his dead lips. Coleman dropped him, a dead weight, upon the ground, and drew from his clenched hand several small cloth packages tied with braid which he was convulsively gripping.

"By all the gods, Felix!" he cried, as he felt their contents. "The stolen diamonds!"

Boyd passed his hand across the dead man's face, sweeping away the red beard and wig with the movement.

"Just as I thought, Jimmie!" he said coolly. "Behold!"

The dead man was Nathan Dickson, the diamond dealer of Maiden Lane!

IV.

The details of what followed that fateful evening are not essential, and it was not until the next morning that Felix Boyd, seated in his office, disclosed to Coleman the remarkable thread of deductions by which he had accomplished his great work.

"It was a curious case, Jimmie," said he, over his pipe; "and not entirely satisfactory. Yet we recovered the diamonds, and so saved their rightful owners from serious losses."

"I should say so," declared the central office man. "But you beat me, Felix, on my word! I'm blessed if I see how you fathomed it."

"I will tell you how," said Boyd. "From the first, I suspected Dickson of some secret game on his own hook, one not involving others. The letter he brought me betrayed him. To begin with, the substance of it lacked the true ring. Then the irregular lines and slanted words indicated that it had been prepared by some one who could not see well; and when I got him to write me his town address, and saw him compelled to hold his reading-glass with one hand while he wrote with the other, awkwardly bowing his head nearly to the page, I was convinced that Dickson himself had made up the letter, and had found such paste work decidedly delicate and difficult. Furthermore, that the spot sponged from his vest that morning, at my mention of which he appeared a little disturbed, was neither more nor less than a spot of paste with which he had daubed himself, and subsequently sponged away."

"By Jove! that was clever! But why didn't you call him down at once?"

"Because I wished to discover his little game," smiled Boyd. "It was no funeral of mine, Jimmie, if Dickson wished to write himself such a letter. It certainly indicated some secret design, as did his visit to me upon such a pretext. But it is an old dodge, Jimmie, that of *averting suspicion* by appearing to confide in the police

or a detective. So I decided that I would let Dickson have what rope he wanted, and so discover to what it led."

"I see now."

"Next came the supposed burglary," continued Boyd. "My investigations in Dickson's store soon convinced me that he alone was the burglar. He held large consignments of diamonds, upon which, if he could invent a plausible robbery, he could subsequently realize."

"Surely! But how did he accomplish it?"

"It was quite plain to me. He employed no help, hence he easily contrived to drill and charge the safe without being observed. Next he planned his day away, and what should occur during his absence, which would free him of subsequent suspicion. Ordinarily, a man could not blow open a safe from which he is miles away. Dickson's chief difficulty lay in firing the fuse at a certain time. Yet he accomplished it in a most original and remarkable way."

"How so?"

"He used his reading-glass, Jimmie, which he so placed on the sill of the rear window that it reached the beam of sunlight through the round hole in the iron shutter, and focused the rays at a certain point on the floor. The intense heat at the focal point was sufficient not only to ignite the end of the fuse, but even to slightly scorch the pine floor. The two curved lines which I showed you gave my clue to the mystery."

"In what way?"

"The sun, as you know, deviates very slightly in its course each day. The day before the trick was to be turned, Dickson experimented with his lens to determine the precise spot on which the sun's rays would focus at a certain time. In so doing, one of the tiny scorched curves was inscribed on the floor, as the intense focal point followed the motion of the sun. Next day, however, the sun was a little higher in the heavens, and the corresponding curved line came parallel, and just the least bit removed from the other; but near enough to fire the fuse Dickson had left for it in his closed store, Jimmie."

"By Jove, Felix, you're a wonder!"

"Not at all," laughed Boyd. "You saw as much as I did, only you did not see through it."

"Plainly not."

"Dickson had so carefully planned all this," continued Boyd; "that the reading-glass would fall over upon the sill with any jar, and the explosion was sufficient for that. Further convincing me that my theory was correct, the aperture in the shutter was unusually low, nearly at the sill, a condition necessary for one wishing to look in, the rear yard being considerably below the window. So I put this and that together, Jimmie, and felt sure of my man."

"And then, Felix?"

"Then I required absolute proofs, Jimmie, since theories do not always impress juries," responded Boyd. "The fact that Dickson had gone to his shore house after rifling his safe before exploding it, led me to think that he might conceal the diamonds in that locality. So I slipped down there early next morning, and investigated his stable. I did not find the diamonds, but I found the contrivance for firing the stable."

"I see."

"Dickson evidently intended to give the impression that he had secret foes, who were maliciously persecuting him, and thus arouse public sympathy and that of his foreign consignees. So he planned also to burn his own stable, in such a way as to evade personal suspicion. The candle was burning when I got there, and was still good for several hours before reaching the loose hay. Of course I extinguished it, and at once decided that, when his scheme failed, Dickson would again attempt it. I was not mistaken, for he came promptly to time."

Coleman smiled and nodded.

"But his violent death, and the three men who murdered him?" he cried inquiringly. "Who are they?"

"Ah, Jimmie, there is where the shoe pinches," said Boyd gravely. "It now is obvious enough, yet I had not suspected it. Plainly those two crimes did not originate in Dickson's brain. I have learned that he has lost heavily on the curb, Jimmie, which doubtless drove him to these felonious designs in the hope of keeping above water."

But Dickson's brain never conceived those two masterly schemes."

"You believe——"

"I believe, Jimmie, that some master knave about here suggested them to him, and showed him the way, yet craftily kept himself in the background. Dickson did the work, and probably his advisers were promised a part of the profits. It may have become Dickson's design to keep the whole, however, the work being successfully done. Hence he must have taken the diamonds to his shore place on his first visit, probably concealing them in the shed from which we saw him emerge."

"Surely! Surely!"

"That his advisers distrusted and subsequently watched him, plainly appears in that they must have followed him down there last night. He must have removed the diamonds from the shed, intending to carry them back to town. Instead, he was viciously assailed by the men who had shadowed him, who doubtless meant to end him, as they did, and make off with the entire lot of stones. My shouts alarmed them, and drove them to flight, before they could accomplish their object. That we found Dickson clutching the diamonds in his death-grip confirms this theory."

"Indeed, yes! But what do you think he tried to say at the finish? We caught one word, Felix. It sounded like why—or wy!"

"It may have meant—why, the beginning of a question," said Boyd. "Or it possibly may have been—Wy, the first syllable of Wykoff!"

"By all the gods, that's so!" cried Coleman. "Meaning that Wykoff was his assassin. If this theory——"

But Mr. Felix Boyd interrupted him with an impressive head-shake.

"There is nothing in theories alone, Jimmie," said he, firmly. "Proofs, not theories, are what we must have. As I have said before, curious things are cropping out about here, and there's a master knave in the background. I mean to find him some day. Meantime, Jimmie, I must prevent his getting a line on me before I get a line on him. So you take all the credit of solving this Dickson

mystery, Jimmie, dear fellow, and let me remain obscurely in the background—like the master knave! For when we come together and lock horns, Jimmie, as we surely shall, it must be on an equal footing, Jimmie. So, you, dear fellow, take all the credit for recovering Dickson's diamonds."

The Case of the Stolen Cipher.

I.

In Wall Street, wealth and power stride hand in hand. Quite frequently the combination makes a man autocratic, arrogant and severe. Such a man was Mr. Jason Barlow, of Graves & Barlow, bankers, who entered the Pine Street office of Mr. Felix Boyd at half-past eight one breezy September morning.

Mr. Felix Boyd, that mysterious individual whose vocation below the "Dead-Line" was a persistent thorn in the sides of the curious, was seated in his private make-up room, when his office boy entered, and quietly announced the visitor.

"Mr. Jason Barlow, sir."

"Of Graves & Barlow?"

"Yes, sir. He wants to see you at once, sir."

Boyd laid aside his pipe, drew from over his knee a blond wig he carefully was combing, and placed both wig and comb on the dresser. Pointing to a flashy plaid suit, which he had had occasion to wear professionally the previous night, he said quietly:

"Stow those traps away, Terry, and close the door when you come out."

"Yes, sir. Trust me to close the door, sir."

Boyd knew Barlow well, and he had a way of handling such men with a sort of frigid blandness not easily over-ridden. He found him, a portly, forceful man of fifty, nervously pacing the floor.

"Good morning, Mr. Barlow," said he sedately. "You're down-town early."

"Yes, and I'm mighty glad to find you in," cried Barlow bluntly.

"Why? Anything wrong?"

"Something very serious threatens us."

The Stolen Cipher.

"Ah!" murmured Boyd, with a subtle gleam from his keen, gray eyes. "That is better than a blow already dealt. One that only threatens may possibly be warded."

"That's precisely what I want done, and why I am here so early."

Boyd complacently took the chair at his desk, and waved his visitor to one near by.

"Sit down," said he. "You interest me. What's the trouble?"

"Are we alone here?" Barlow curtly demanded.

"Except my office boy," drawled Boyd, just as Terry Gowan emerged from the side room, snapping the catch lock after him. Boyd turned to him, and added: "You may hang about the corridor, Terry, until I call you."

"Yes, sir."

"Can that boy be trusted, Boyd, not to listen at the door?" asked Barlow, after the lad had left the room.

"Better even than that. He will insure us against other listeners. You may speak freely, Mr. Barlow."

"And confidentially!" was the sharp reply. "What I have to say to you, Felix Boyd, must never go farther."

Boyd glanced indifferently at a red leather book on his desk.

"The house of Graves & Barlow is listed among those responsible for my very important duties and secret operations in this part of the city," he said, with rather dry significance. "You already should know, Mr. Barlow, that you may confide in me as freely as one trusts his attorney—or his confessor."

"Surely; surely!" muttered Barlow, a little perturbed by the quiet rebuke. "But this is a very serious business, Boyd. Very serious!"

"The more binding my obligations, then. Come to the point, Mr. Barlow."

The Wall Street magnate no longer demurred. He drew from his pocket a document envelope, yet before he opened it he jerked his chair nearer that of his companion, and said forcibly:

"As you are well aware, Boyd, our firm operates very heavily in the stock market, and frequently engineers deals which involve many millions of dollars."

"Yes, I am well aware of it."

"Necessarily, such tremendous operations are very secretly planned and conducted," Barlow went on, with an energy quite in contrast with Boyd's odd quietude. "If our designs and plans were prematurely published, or so much as suspected by rival operators and the great army of habitual speculators, market values might be affected in a way that would cost us millions—millions, Boyd! and perhaps hopelessly thwart our designs."

"It is not at all necessary to impress these facts upon me," said Boyd dryly. "Does your business with me this morning relate to such tremendous operations?"

"Precisely; as I will show you," said Barlow, now instinctively lowering his voice. "After nearly four months of cautious work in several of the great markets, we have acquired control of most of the stock necessary to rushing through a deal that already has cost millions."

"Well?"

"Briefly put, it is to consist of a merger of two large midland railway systems into one of the most powerful Western roads. Confidentially, Boyd, in case we now are able to rush it through, this merger may meet with serious opposition from the attorney-general at Washington, and perhaps be turned down as illegal; but we are going to take chances against that, and fight to a finish any litigation that arises."

"I see," nodded Boyd, not just liking the project.

"Our firm," continued the financier; "has not been alone in this work. We have had the cooperation of some of the strongest banking-houses both in Boston and Chicago. The work has been very gradually and cautiously done. From their very inception, Mr. Boyd, our designs have been concealed even from most of the employees of the several firms engaged in the work; while that done by us, who are solely directing the work, has been removed from our main office to temporary quarters in the same building, where we employ only a stenographer and one thoroughly trustworthy clerk."

"Continue."

"One of us, either Graves or myself, is constantly there during business hours, to guard against any miscarriage of our plans, for the successful execution of which we are directly responsible," Barlow continued. "We have

deemed absolute secrecy to be so imperative, moreover, that we have not relied upon ordinary communication with our Boston and Chicago correspondents, lest a mislaid letter or a leak in a private wire should betray our designs."

"Then you have been using a code, I infer, or a secret cipher?"

"Yes and no," replied Barlow, now reverting to the envelope in his hand. "Can you make anything of this, Mr. Boyd?"

With the last he displayed a sheet of paper, foolscap size. It was thin and nearly transparent, yet was quite strong, and was irregularly perforated with rectangular holes of various sizes, each of which was carefully numbered with pen and ink. In appearance, though on a much smaller scale, it somewhat resembled the perforated music sheet used in a so-called self-playing organ or piano.

Felix Boyd merely glanced at it.

"I should have known," said he, "had your remarks given me no hint of it; it is a part of your secret cipher, or code. By properly placing that sheet upon some printed page, a duplicate of which is possessed by each correspondent, and reading in numerical order the words visible through the perforations, a communication easily and safely is imparted. That sheet alone conveys absolutely nothing. To use it at all, one must possess a printed page corresponding with that on which the sheet was laid when the perforations were made and numbered. That method of secret correspondence is not new or original, Mr. Barlow."

"True," admitted Barlow; "yet it is the one we adopted. We have not used a page from any book, however, very few of which would contain such a diversity of words as our business requires. Instead, we had a printed page expressly prepared, containing a vocabulary adequate to our needs, and a copy of which is possessed by each of our correspondents."

"Certainly."

"Now, Boyd, to state my business," said Barlow, bracing back in his chair. "I told you that we were very seriously threatened. In a nutshell, we suspect that

a copy of the printed page from which our secret correspondence sheets are prepared is possessed by some outside party."

"Is that so?" rejoined Boyd, his brows knitting slightly. "Yet, in that case, even the printed page alone would convey nothing. For an outside party to read one of your secret letters, he must possess also the perforated sheet."

"We believe, also," cried Barlow, "that duplicates of several of these sheets have gone into outside hands, either from our own office or those of our correspondents of the cities mentioned."

Boyd leaned forward with increased interest.

"Why do you believe that, Mr. Barlow?" he demanded.

"It is indicated by recent heavy operations in the market, on the part of a house we have serious occasion to fear."

"Kennedy & Peck?"

"Precisely. Not only have they opposed us from the first, being interested in one of the roads of which we aim to get control, but lately they have gone very long of the stock. Every act on their part points to the fact that they suspect our designs. Furthermore, we have learned that they recently have employed a private detective, from some agency below here, in an effort to secretly ascertain what we are about. I am quite confident of this."

"Why so? From whom do you get your information?"

"Frankly, Boyd, we get it from Jimmie Coleman, of the central office, whom we secretly employed as a foil to the other."

"Coleman, eh? Why, then, have you called upon me?"

"You should know why," said Barlow bluntly. "Because our operations in the market have reached a stage where the least slip may ruin all, and we require the services of a man of the greatest acumen and ability. Our affairs have taken an unexpected and serious turn within twenty-four hours."

"Ah, I begin to see."

"Upon receipt of advices expected from Chicago, we must be prepared to go into the New York market at once, and strike a culminating blow. There can be no delay in this, no hesitation, owing to lack of funds, or

because of failing courage. Our entire project is involved; and if, on receipt of such a letter from Chicago, its contents were to be disclosed to those opposed to our immediate operations in the market, the perversion of our entire scheme might result, and ruin come where we look for success. That is why I have come to you, Felix Boyd, and why I am here so early this morning. For all I know to the contrary," quickly added Barlow, "our morning mail may bring the Chicago letter."

"A perforated sheet?"

"Surely! surely!"

"Then you as surely can prevent its being removed from your office, or any duplicate of it treacherously sent out," said Boyd. "Although my contract with you insures you my best services, Mr. Barlow, I do not quite understand just what you require of me."

"I'll tell you what I require," declared Barlow, with an emphatic nod. "I want to learn whether or not Kennedy & Peck have any definite knowledge of our designs, and if so, how it was acquired. This cannot be done too quickly, either."

"Yet you give me but brief notice, sir, if this game that you are secretly playing has suddenly become so strenuous. Still, I will do my best for you, Mr. Barlow."

"No man could do more."

Boyd swung round to his desk, and prepared to take a few notes.

"Now, tell me," he cried. "Who printed the several pages from which your perforated sheets are prepared? I mean the pages sent to your several correspondents."

"The work was done in our own office. A typewritten page, having six columns of words covering our needs."

"Do you suspect any person in your own office of treachery?"

"Not one."

"What about the offices in Boston and Chicago?"

"I have assurances from both."

"That everything is all right?"

"Certainly."

"That brings the trouble very near home," said Boyd bluntly. "Who is the clerk employed by you in this work?"

"A man named Gardner, who has been in our service for twenty years. I could not distrust him."

"You spoke of a stenographer, also."

"Yes. A Miss Dole, who——"

"Wait," interrupted Boyd quickly. "Dole, did you say? Describe her."

"She is a tall, handsome girl, with reddish hair, and has been in our employ for nearly a year," replied Barlow. "She came to us with recommendations from——"

He again was interrupted, now by the sudden, sharp ringing of the telephone bell; and Felix Boyd, with eyes glittering in a way indicating his mental excitement, caught up the receiver from the stand on his desk.

"Hello! Yes—yes!" he at first cried; then hurriedly added, to his visitor: "It is Mr. Graves, your partner. Did he know you were coming here this morning?"

"I told him I should stop here on my way down," cried Barlow, hastening to take the instrument.

Boyd silently waited.

At first only the conventional calls passed between the two men using the wire. Then Barlow listened silently for several moments—and then Felix Boyd saw the color leave his face until his skin was as gray as ashes.

"My God—oh, my God!" he abruptly gasped, with eyes half starting from his head.

Then the instrument fell from his shaking hands, and the Wall Street operator sank back in his chair like a man suddenly stricken with overwhelming illness.

Boyd instantly caught up the telephone receiver, crying sharply:

"What's wrong, Mr. Barlow? What's wrong?"

"The worst—the very worst!" groaned Barlow, staring with ghastly despair at Boyd's forceful face. "The Chicago cipher sheet came in our morning mail. Graves had it—had it——"

"Had it!" shouted Boyd, when Barlow choked and faltered as if bereft of speech. "Hasn't he still got it? You don't mean that he has lost it?"

"Yes—yes! It is missing from our office, and——"

"Silence! Wait!"

Boyd spoke with a half-smothered growl of excitement, then caught up the telephone, and quickly com-

The Stolen Cipher.

manded Graves to do absolutely nothing about the matter until he and Barlow arrived. Next, with countenance grown dark and threatening, he seized a revolver from his desk drawer and thrust it into his hip pocket.

"Pull yourself together, Mr. Barlow," he cried, hurriedly rising. "This is no time for going lame. Do you know that the stolen cipher requires your move in the market this very day?"

"There can be no doubt of it—no doubt of it!"

"Look lively, then! It is just nine o'clock! In one hour the market will open!" Boyd rapidly cried, with a glance at his watch. "Within an hour, Mr. Barlow, that missing sheet must be recovered! To your office without delay!"

Boyd's influence over others at such crises was irresistible. The invincible spirit of the man imparted new strength to his hearer, and Barlow already was upon his feet. Together the two men rushed from Boyd's office, and down the stairway leading to Pine Street.

II.

Since this narrative relates chiefly to the remarkable detective work of Mr. Felix Boyd, there is no occasion for details of the extraordinary game then being played in the stock market, the magnitude of which already has been suggested. Men of the street will promptly recall the bitter strife of that brief but strenuous period, and will at once recognize the extreme gravity of the situation threatening the house of Graves & Barlow that morning.

It is needless, too, to point out at this time the causes for Felix Boyd's suddenly increased interest in the case. This will become apparent as the story progresses.

As the two men emerged to the sidewalk, Boyd collided heavily with a third, just about entering.

"Beg your—ah, Jimmie, is it you? How lucky!"

This third man proved to be Boyd's most intimate and confidential associate—Detective Jimmie Coleman, of the central office.

"What's up, Felix?" he cried, before he fairly had caught his balance. "Are you going for a doctor?"

Boyd did not answer him. He had hailed a passing cab.

"Tumble in, Jimmie! I want you with me!" he commanded, in a way precluding any delay for discussions. "You'll have to walk, Mr. Barlow."

"But," protested Barlow, "I wish to reach my office as quickly as——"

"There are no buts about it," Boyd decisively interrupted, as he followed Coleman into the cab. "If I'm to do you any good, I must do it in my own peculiar way. To the office of Graves & Barlow, cabbie, and don't spare that horse. A dollar a minute is yours if we bag our game. Away with you!"

They were away before the promise was fairly uttered, leaving Barlow resentful and frowning on the curb, while Boyd settled himself on the seat beside the central office man.

"What's the meaning of all this, Felix?" demanded Coleman, as the vehicle swung quickly into Nassau Street and headed for Broad.

In a very few words, Boyd outlined the situation, adding, in a way that left no room for doubts:

"Every instant is now of value, Jimmie. We've got to recover that perforated sheet before its message can be learned, or Graves & Barlow are dead dogs. And we have mighty few minutes in which to turn the trick."

"You're off on some clue," cried Coleman quickly.

"One as fine as a spider's thread, but I've an idea 'twill hold."

"State it."

"They have a stenographer named Dole, tall and red-headed—you remember her," Boyd rapidly cried. "That girl employed by Curry, Gale & Fiske, at the time we nailed that bond robbery in the Howard building, when you sent Mason Gorman over the Styx."

"Surely!"

"If this girl is the same, Jimmie, we certainly have *our game uncovered*, and it remains only to drop 'em.

If I am right about this girl, I am convinced of another fact."

"Namely?"

"That we again are up against that obscure and crafty gang in which that fellow Wykoff figures, as a subordinate to some head infinitely superior to his own. 'Twas Wykoff, you know, whom we suspected in that bond case, also in that affair which cost Dickson, the diamond dealer, his life; but the crafty scamp was so shrewdly directed, and both knaveries so craftily planned and executed, that we could get no hold on him. Jupiter Ammon! I'll not sleep nights until I get some traceable clue to the master back of these subordinates."

Felix Boyd never rattled on in this fashion except when he was deeply stirred and bitterly determined; and his glowing eyes, his unusual paleness, his drawn lips and fixed jaws, all indicated that he was launched into this affair for Barlow in a way quite regardless of himself.

Coleman read these signs aright, and hastened to re-join:

"You'd better have a care, Felix. This girl may recognize you as the man who queered the game against Curry, Gale & Fiske."

"Not likely," Boyd quickly answered. "I guarded against her seeing me when at their office."

"Bear in mind that you wish to remain in the background, Felix, until some clue to the chief of this gang can be obtained."

"I have all in mind, Jimmie," cried Boyd impatiently. "Even if this girl should recognize me, she can report no more of me than already is suspected. At any cost, Jimmie, I must recover that cipher sheet in time to save these men by whom I am secretly employed. We have not an instant to spare—ah, here we are! Do you know where their temporary offices are located?"

"Top of the building," tersely cried Coleman, as both sprang from the cab. "I'll nail the elevator."

"Wait here, cabbie!" commanded Boyd, pausing for an instant on the curb. "Not a move, if you value your license. I may want you again in three minutes."

"And it's here you'll find me," shouted the cabman, as

Boyd dashed up the steps of the sky-scraper before which the vehicle had halted, and vanished into the corridor.

Coleman luckily had discovered the elevator just about starting up, and, in precisely six minutes after telephoning to Graves from his quarters in Pine Street, Boyd led the way into the banker's office.

It consisted of two rear rooms, with a door between them, located on the top floor of one of New York's loftiest buildings. That into which Boyd entered opened upon the corridor, and had only a single side window looking down upon the street. It was conventionally furnished after the fashion of a broker's office, and Boyd found Graves and his clerk, Gardner, anxiously waiting his arrival. There was no sign or sound of the stenographer, and the door between the two rooms was closed.

Graves quickly sprang up when Boyd entered, and was about to speak, but the latter cut him off with a gesture, crying sharply:

"Not a word! Not a word, Graves, except in answer to my questions. I know just what you wish to tell me, but every second is of value, and I'll not hear a needless word. Just answer my questions, sir, and as briefly as possible."

There was no dodging such a beginning as this, say nothing of the look on Felix Boyd's white face, and for an instant Banker Graves was fairly nonplused. Before he could open his mouth, however, Boyd had sprung his first question, with a voice that had the ringing snap of a steel trap.

"Just when did your Chicago letter arrive?"

Graves caught his breath, and steadied himself to answer.

"At quarter past eight this morning."

"Were you then here?"

"Yes."

"Did it come direct to you?"

"It was sent up from our lower office."

"Was it opened down there?"

"No. All secret letters bearing on this business are marked personal, and sent directly up here."

"Did you open it personally?"

"Yes."

"Have you transcribed its contents?"

"Yes."

"Where was that done?"

"On yonder desk."

"By whom?"

"Gardner and myself."

"Where was your stenographer then?"

"In the next room."

"Has Gardner been out of this office since you missed the cipher sheet?"

"No, sir; not out of this room."

"How long since you missed it?"

"I at once telephoned to your office. You can estimate the time as well as I."

Boyd snatched out his watch from his pocket. It was precisely ten minutes after nine.

"Eleven to twelve minutes," he muttered. "Now answer! When did you last see the missing sheet?"

"I took it into the next room to dictate a letter to my stenographer," replied Graves, now talking as rapidly as possible, and wondering in a vague way what sort of a brain this man Boyd could have, to determine with such celerity the significance of each and every atom of evidence which his avalanche of questions might suggest.

"Go on! Go on, sir!" cried Boyd, impatiently stamping his foot. "You must see the need of haste. Go on, I say!"

Again the banker steadied his shaking nerves.

"While dictating the letter to Miss Dole," he hurriedly continued, "I laid the cipher sheet on a table near by. When done, I returned to this room to plan my morning work in the market. I was thus engaged for about twenty minutes. Then I wanted the cipher sheet again, and I sent Gardner into the other room to get it. It was not there. Miss Dole at once informed me that I had brought it out here, which I absolutely know to be wrong. We at once began a vain search for it——"

"Stop!" cried Boyd sharply. "You now have told me all you really know about it?"

"Everything. We cannot find it, or——"

"That's enough!" snapped Boyd, with indescribable

asperity. "If you value my efforts, don't get in the way of any move that I now may make."

Few men, in fact, would have cared to oppose one so intensely exercised as Boyd appeared to be. Yet his every word was uttered, and his every move made, with such amazing celerity and decision that one could not doubt that he was working along a clearly perceived and very definite line.

With an ugly look in his eyes, with his forceful white features severely drawn, Boyd now threw open the closed door and strode into the adjoining room, where a single glance at the banker's stenographer revealed her to be the girl he suspected, the same one he had seen in the office of Curry, Gale & Fiske at the time of the famous bond robbery.

Halting abruptly, Boyd pointed his finger straight at the breast of the startled girl, and cried, with terrible sternness:

"Tell me, girl! Tell me at once! What do you know about this missing sheet?"

Miss Dole instantly sprang up from her chair at the typewriter, and turned to face him. She was trembling violently, and was as white as the lace at her pulsing throat; yet her flashing eyes, her frowning brow, her attitude of mingled resentment and defiance, all indicated not only that she was a girl of superior nerve and daring, but also that she was fully prepared for just such a scene as this.

"I know nothing about it!" she cried indignantly. "I've not seen it since Mr. Graves took it into the other room."

"You are sure of that?" thundered Boyd. "He says he left it here, and——"

"I don't care what he says!" Miss Dole passionately cried. "I have eyes, sir! I have eyes, and saw him take it from this room! If he charges me with——"

"He makes no charges against you," Boyd sternly interrupted, at once perceiving that the girl felt sure of herself and of the attitude she had assumed.

To search the girl, or the room, he now was convinced would prove vain.

With one swift glance he took in the pertinent features

of the room. It had no exit except into the room adjoining. To have reached the corridor of the building, or to have communicated with any person there, Miss Dole must have passed through the office occupied by the two men.

"Has this girl left this room since entering it this morning?" cried Boyd, swinging sharply around and addressing Graves, then at the open door.

"No, she has not," cried the banker.

"You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely. I can swear to it."

Boyd instantly turned to the two broad windows, the only avenue by which, under the conditions stated, the missing sheet could have been conveyed to any outside party. With a bound he reached one of the windows, and threw it open to look out.

At a glance, he took in the meager possibilities presented. The two windows were in the rear elevation of the building, and near one corner of it, that in the next room being in the side elevation and above the adjoining street. Far below him, so far that they appeared dwarfed, was a maze of smaller buildings, the numerous roofs of which appeared in uneven and disorderly confusion from the altitude at which he gazed. To have dropped the missing sheet with any accuracy to a person on one of the roofs below would have been next to impossible; and Boyd saw at once that so hazardous an attempt to dispose of so valuable a paper would not have been made.

"Who occupies the room under this?" he hurriedly demanded, glancing back at Graves.

"Cavendish & Page, publishers," cried the banker.

"Do they employ many hands in the room just below?"

"Yes. A dozen or more."

Boyd instantly dropped the theory which had impelled these hurried questions; a theory that the sheet might have been tied to a string and lowered to some person at the window below.

"Not feasible!" he muttered, under his breath. "Too many observers down there! This affair precludes many *confederates*! Yet that missing sheet, to have been made

available this very morning, which Barlow assures me would be imperative, must have in some way been conveyed to an outsider."

While thus measuring the situation, Boyd drew back into the room, then paused to gaze at the flat roof of a much lower building about a hundred yards distant. Of this building only two of the upper windows commanded a view of that in which he stood, the view from the others being obstructed by the irregular roofs of the intervening buildings.

Suddenly Boyd wet the palm of his hand with his tongue, then thrust his hand far out of the window to learn the precise direction of the wind—a method common enough among sailors. Then, moving like a flash, he sprang back into the room.

"Graves, don't let that girl go until I return," he cried vehemently. "Keep her here until——"

"I will go if I wish——"

"If she attempts to leave this room, call an officer and place her under arrest!" thundered Boyd. "This way, Jimmie! Come with me at once! This way—this way!"

And Felix Boyd, with Coleman close upon his heels, tore out of the banker's office, and headed for the stairway making to the street.

Just a minute later Mr. Jason Barlow rushed into the office.

"Isn't Boyd here?" he demanded. "Hasn't Boyd arrived?"

"Arrived—yes! And gone!" replied Graves.

"Gone!"

"Yes. He asked several questions, and then left in a hurry. He has some plan. I do not know what it is, but if he doesn't find that cipher——"

"We will go under as sure as fate," finished Barlow, despairingly.

III.

Felix Boyd did not wait for the elevator. People who observed them stared dumfounded at the two men, one close after the other, descending at breakneck speed the successive flights of stairs, with never a word one to the

other, and never a stop for breath until they reached the busy street and the waiting cab.

In a few hurried words, Boyd gave the driver his directions, adding, breathlessly:

"Don't lose a moment, cabbie! Make your own price for the service, but don't lose an instant! Millions depend upon you!"

Like all who had encountered Boyd during the past ten minutes, the cabman was a little rattled. Boyd's potent influence over others at such times constrained prompt obedience, however, and within three minutes the cabman drew up his horse at the building which Boyd had particularly observed from the banker's office windows.

"Find the janitor, Jimmie," cried Boyd, as he leaped to the sidewalk. "Rush him up to the top floor in case I require his keys. I'll go right up. Follow me as quickly as possible."

Most of this was spoken while both men dashed up the steps and into the building. While Coleman began a hurried search for the janitor, Boyd caught the elevator just about rising, and at once started for the top floor. On his way up he studied the face of the elevator conductor, a crooked-back Irishman, with decidedly crafty, gray eyes, and asked in a casual way:

"Who occupies the office farthest east on the rear corridor, top floor?"

The Irishman glanced sharply at him.

"How wud I know," said he, with an oily brogue. "I niver waz afther hearing his name."

"Do you know him by sight?" inquired Boyd.

"I've sane him, but he's not afther being here long."

"Do you know whether he now is in his office?"

"Sure, sur, I couldn't soy if I wud."

Boyd needed no more to convince him that the Irishman had been cautioned against being communicative, very possibly by the tenant in question, and he let the matter drop. On arriving at the top floor, however, he hastened to the rear corridor, and presently reached the door of the office mentioned. He had located it with absolute precision; it was the office containing the windows which commanded a view of the lofty offices of Graves & Barlow.

Boyd tried the door and found it locked. Then he vainly attempted to open it with several keys which he had in his pocket. Next he stood for a second or two impatiently stamping the floor, vainly waiting for Coleman to bring the janitor. The delay irritated him like nettles. He glanced up and discovered a transom above the door.

"Glass!" he muttered, half in his throat. "I must get in at once. If I'm on the wrong track, I can make apologies later. If on the right track, however, one second's delay may cost me the game. I'll force an entrance!"

Leaping up, he seized the sill below the transom window, and fixed his foot on the knob of the door. Then he drew his revolver, gripping it by the barrel, and with several rapid blows he scattered the pane of glass in fragments over the office floor.

The noise caused by the breaking glass brought half-a-score of men rushing from the adjoining rooms, from whom cries for the janitor and the police quickly arose. To none of them, however, Boyd paid the slightest attention; and before any could arrive to prevent him, he worked his way with the agility of a contortionist through the broken transom, and dropped headlong into the office.

There he sprang to his feet, and darted to the window to make sure he was right. A glance assured him. Far away over the intervening roofs, and high above him in the lofty sky-scraper, the windows of Graves & Barlow's office were quite plainly visible.

Still moving with unabated haste, and ignoring the uproar now in the adjoining corridor, Boyd looked sharply about the office. In every way it was inferior, containing only a cheap desk and two wooden chairs, with a small stove and hod in one corner—a condition which instantly convinced him that the place had been rented only temporarily, as a means for some project out of the ordinary lines of business.

The temperature of the room was higher than in the corridor, a fact which Boyd promptly detected, and he darted to the stove and opened the door.

"Ha! there has been a fire here!" he muttered, peering sharply at the smoldering black refuse in the stove. "No embers left! Yet this burned rubbish has been vigorously

disturbed, as if to destroy all indications of its character. Was it excelsior—no! Aha, I have it! It was—string! The poker—by Jove! the poker!”

This humble adjunct to a stove was lying upon the floor near the hod, and Boyd now pounced upon it like a terrier upon a rat.

“Warm!” he muttered, feeling of the crooked iron end. “Still warm! I am right, and must be close upon his track. The poker is not yet cold. He can have left here but a few moments ago. Now to get out, and after him.”

With eyes glowing brighter, even, and reflecting the triumphant fervor that was inspiring his haste, he darted toward the office door. Yet before he had reached it a key was thrust into the lock, the door thrown violently open, and Coleman and the janitor appeared upon the threshold.

Before the astounded janitor could speak, Boyd brushed rudely by him, and fell to forcing his way through the excited crowd of men in the corridor, at the same time shouting loudly:

“Follow me, Jimmie! I’ve hit the nail on the head! Lose not a moment. Follow me, and——”

“Not yet!” roared the janitor, springing upon him from behind. “You have broken into this office. The police shall——”

“Police be blowed!” thundered Coleman, throwing open his coat to display his detective’s badge. “Make way there! I’m a central office man, and will answer for this. Room, gentlemen, room! Make way, I say! Make way!”

He had hurled the janitor aside while speaking, and now the awed crowd fell back and opened a way for the two men to pass. Boyd led the way, again at breakneck speed, through the corridor and down the stairs, and again the previous scene with the cabman was repeated.

“To the corner of Broad Street and Exchange Place!” shouted Boyd, as he followed Coleman into the waiting vehicle.

As they sprang down at the corner mentioned, Boyd caught Coleman by the arm and pointed to a huge office *building* some fifty yards away, in which were located

the offices occupied by Kennedy & Peck, bankers and brokers.

"To the rear door, Jimmie!" he cried rapidly. "If you see a man resembling Paul Wykoff, arrest him on the spot. You may head him off there if he attempts to sneak in a back way—barring that we are too late. Leave the rest to me."

Coleman hastened toward the narrow street making to the rear of the building, and just thirty seconds later Mr. Felix Boyd walked composedly into the elaborate rooms occupied by Kennedy & Peck. With merely a glance at the numerous clerks in the several enclosures, he made his way unceremoniously into the private office of the firm, and promptly closed the door. Precisely as he expected, he found both members of the firm seated in the room; and, which gave him a quick thrill of triumphant satisfaction, he observed that they were alone.

By the clock on the wall it was precisely half-past nine—just thirty minutes since Boyd left his office in Pine Street.

In an open grate at one side a wood fire was burning briskly, the September morning being a little cool. The two members of the firm were seated in the sunlight near one of the broad windows, apparently discussing some business matter. Both looked up sharply when Boyd entered. The latter at once removed his hat.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said politely.

Kennedy started to his feet.

"Excuse me! This is our private office," he snarled.

"Precisely where my business brings me," retorted Boyd dryly. "Sit down again, I beg."

"I cannot call you by name, sir," cried Kennedy; "and I know of no business that warrants this intrusion. Leave our private office at once; or I'll call the police, if you——"

"Stop right there, Mr. Kennedy!" said Boyd sternly. "I have business here, very serious business, as you presently may discover. Until that business is completed, gentlemen, not one of us will leave this room!"

"Are you a madman?" Kennedy exclaimed.

"No, sir; but I am a very determined man! Now, understand me, gentlemen! If I am mistaken, I shall

offer you very humble apologies a little later. If I am not mistaken, however, a man named Paul Wykoff will soon enter this room.

"Now once again—understand me! When that man enters, if he does, the first word or slightest sign from either one of you will bring a bullet from this revolver. If you doubt that I mean all I say, attempt to leave this room! Sit down, Mr. Kennedy! That's right, sir! Now, not a word while we sit and wait!"

It was a remarkable scene, so quickly, yet forcibly, was it enacted. Boyd had drawn his revolver, and advanced to take a chair near the table in the middle of the room. That each of his hearers was quelled more by his own guilty conscience than by Boyd's weapon, appeared in that each had glanced apprehensively at the other, and both had grown deathly pale. At Boyd's final command, Kennedy had resumed his seat, and a silence covering several minutes ensued.

Then hurried steps were heard approaching through the outer office.

Boyd glanced sternly at his observers, then took his revolver from the table, and concealed it back of his hip. He scarce had done so when the office door was rapidly opened, and the very man he expected, Paul Wykoff, rushed into the room.

At such a moment, and under the sudden stress of excitement and dismay he must have felt on seeing Felix Boyd, only one man in ten thousand could have commanded his emotions. But the nerves of Paul Wykoff evidently were as firm and flexible as steel. His dark features scarcely changed. Only one sharp gleam and glitter showed in his coal-black eyes, like the glitter seen at times in the eyes of a snake.

Without an instant's hesitation, he said, in perfectly conventional tones:

"Mr. Kennedy, I wish to borrow five hundred shares of Atchison common. Can you let me have them until to-morrow?"

Even while speaking, and without so much as a second glance at Boyd, Wykoff turned a little to one side and brought his back within a foot of the open grate.

The very next instant Felix Boyd beheld the flames of burning paper directly behind the crafty scoundrel.

With a bound like that of a leopard, Boyd left his chair and sprang toward the grate—only to catch sight of a charred sheet of thin, perforated paper just as the draft caught it and wafted it swiftly up the chimney.

"Hello!" coolly exclaimed Wykoff, thrusting Boyd aside. "What the devil's the matter with you?"

"Nothing at all," said Boyd. "Why do you ask? Why do you push me away from the grate?"

"Grate?" echoed Wykoff inquiringly, with a backward glance to see if the sheet he so quickly and craftily had dropped into the flames had been consumed. Then he turned with a smile, one not easily described, it was so like a mingled sneer and threat, and added coolly:

"I pushed you aside, sir, only because I thought you were about to lay violent hands on me."

Felix Boyd came one step nearer to him, and for a moment fixed his piercing eyes upon the fellow's sallow, cold face.

"I shall lay violent hands on you some day, Wykoff, and when I do—I shall confine them in bracelets!" he retorted slowly.

Then Boyd turned abruptly to Kennedy and Peck, and saw that both were smiling.

"There is no occasion for apologies, gentlemen," said he, with icy sarcasm. "Plainly enough, you all know why I am here. Also that my business now is completed—and, in a very great measure, successfully completed! Gentlemen, I bid you good morning."

And, without another word, Boyd strode out of the office, and went to seek Coleman.

"It's all off, Jimmie," said he, upon rejoining him.

"Not failed!" cried Coleman anxiously.

"Not by a long chalk, Jimmie!" laughed Boyd, with a toss of his head. "Failures are not in my line. I have queered the game of Kennedy & Peck all right, yet I have not turned the trick quite as nicely as I would have liked. Drop round to my office in time for lunch, and I will explain the whole business. I first must hasten to reassure my clients."

It was a quarter of ten when Boyd reentered the office.

of Graves & Barlow. He silenced both men with a gesture, then turned to the inner room, and confronted their stenographer.

"Miss Dole," said he, with quiet severity, "if you are at all wise, you will immediately make a decided turn for the better. If you do not, I shall land you behind prison bars some day. Not a word! Put on your hat and go!"

The girl grew very red, frowning resentfully, but the gleam in Boyd's steadfast eyes awed her to silence. She arose and put on her hat, then hurriedly departed.

Boyd turned to the amazed bankers, over whose faces the light of reviving hope had begun to appear.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I understand that you have a copy of the message conveyed by your missing cipher sheet?"

"Certainly!" cried Graves. "I transcribed it myself."

"All is well, then," said Boyd, smiling oddly. "I congratulate you. The cipher sheet has gone up in smoke. I saw it burned in the office of Kennedy & Peck less than ten minutes ago. I give you my word that it has not been read since leaving this office, and I trust that my positive assurance of that will enable you to enter the market with perfect confidence this morning. Gentlemen, it is for such emergencies as this that you employ Mr. Felix Boyd, and the provisions of my contract with you are very properly executed."

* * * * *

Boyd smiled when Jimmie Coleman asked him about the case at lunch that day.

"It was simple enough in a way, Jimmie," said he. "The only disturbing feature of it was the serious need of extraordinary haste. To run down that cipher sheet in a single half hour certainly was a task to have staggered most men, and I am inclined to think that most of our observers thought us out of our heads."

Coleman laughed as he recalled some of the incidents of that wild pursuit.

"But the line on which you worked, Felix," said he. "I don't quite see it."

"Simple as two and two, Jimmie," said Boyd carelessly. "To be of any use, the cipher sheet had to be con-

veyed to outside parties this very morning. Miss Dole was the only person who had any opportunity to do this, yet she dared not leave her office for that purpose. A brief investigation there showed me that it could have been done only by the window, and this girl's previous relations with Wykoff convinced me that he again was her confederate."

"That's plain enough, Felix."

"A brief survey from the window," continued Boyd, "showed me that she could not have safely dropped the sheet, and that other means must have been employed. Necessarily, since Wykoff could not have known just when the cipher sheet would arrive, some signal from the girl must have informed him of its arrival this morning. The only available point from which Wykoff could have been constantly watching for her signal was the window of the office I next visited."

"Ah, I see!"

"I tried to get there before Wykoff could leave, not then feeling sure just how the job had been done. I began to suspect it, however, when I observed the direction of the wind. I arrived too late to catch Wykoff in his office, but in the stove there I found a lot of burned paper and string."

"Oh, ho!" cried Coleman quickly. "A kite!"

"Precisely," laughed Boyd. "I since have learned that two of the janitor's children have lately been in the habit of flying a kite from the flat roof of the building. Probably they were put up to this by Wykoff himself, that the incident of this particular morning might not be specially observed. Wykoff certainly did the work this morning, and so skilfully manipulated the kite that Miss Dole was able, from her window in the sky-scraper, to attach the cipher sheet to the tail of the kite without being seen. You remember that the window of the adjoining room, where Graves and Gardner were, was in the side elevation, and probably the girl's clever work required but a few minutes."

Coleman laughed deeply.

"That was the way of it, surely," said he. "Boyd, you're all right!"

"All that saved us, however," smiled Felix Boyd, "was

the fact that Wykoff required considerable time in which to reel in the kite, and afterward burn the string and kite itself, thus destroying this evidence against him."

"Oh, he's a crafty dog, for a fact!"

"On finding the stove and poker still warm, I knew he had been gone but a few moments, and I at once aimed to head him off before he could deliver the cipher sheet to Kennedy & Peck, where Graves & Barlow knew it was wanted."

"I see the point," nodded Coleman.

"I got there ahead of Wykoff, all right," laughed Boyd. "The moment Wykoff entered and saw me, however, he very quickly and cleverly decided to sacrifice the cipher sheet in order to save himself and Miss Dole. It was done before I could prevent it, for which I'm a bit sorry; yet I served my clients very successfully, for all that."

"It now is plain enough, and it was well done," bowed Coleman approvingly. "After the burning of the sheet, you really had no good hold on these scamps."

"None worth anything," replied Boyd. "Hence I made no arrests. I am convinced that Kennedy & Peck hired this job done, however, and that it was the work of the same gang that perpetrated that bond robbery, and attempted to relieve Dickson of his diamonds."

"No doubt of it, Felix," cried Coleman. "Yet as for this obscure gang, and the prospect of locating it, you are not much better off than you were this morning."

"Not a whit better, Jimmie," grimly answered Boyd, laying aside his napkin. "But I will land them! Jimmie, take my word for it—I will land them!"

The Case of the Man Who Vanished.

I.

"Come, you—get a move on!" commanded Jimmie Coleman, with a growl. "You've muckled long enough in that rubbish. Move on, I say!"

The party thus addressed by the central office man, who for several minutes had been furtively watching him, appeared to be an Italian. He was a ragged, crooked-backed fellow, delving with an iron hook into several refuse barrels near an alley in one of the back streets of the banking-district, and occasionally thrusting a handful of rags or a bit of old junk into a huge burlap bag hung over his bowed shoulders.

The ragpicker looked up with a semi-subdued snarl.

"Me no mova!" he resentfully muttered. "You bigga no good, you tella me mova on!"

"Dry up, you dog, and get out!" Coleman sternly retorted, not liking the fellow's looks. "Move lively, too, or I'll run you in."

The ragpicker's dingy face took on a curious leer, and he now rejoined in a whisper, so incisive that it seemed fairly to cut its way through his matted beard:

"Instead, Jimmie, run into my office a little later, and I'll make you wise to my game."

Coleman could have been floored with a feather. He stared briefly at the speaker's upturned, hangdog face, then caught the subtle gleam of the keen, gray eyes he thought he knew so well.

"Perdition!" he growled. "Is it you, Felix? What the devil——"

"Careful!" whispered Mr. Felix Boyd. "See me later, Jimmie."

Even while he spoke he worked the huge burlap bag squarely upon his back, then shambling slowly away,

crooked and unsteady, with his unkempt head shaken as if with palsy, and so he presently disappeared around the nearest corner.

Boyd laughed in a quiet way, when Coleman dropped into his Pine Street office some hours later, and at once inquired about the unusual episode.

"Going to run me in, were you, Jimmie?" said he, with a quizzical light in his keen, expressive eyes. "You need a pair of double-convex glasses, old man."

"Cut that out," growled Coleman, with a laugh. "A man would need an X-ray, along with the glasses, to penetrate some of your infernally artistic make-ups. In what sort of a game are you now engaged?"

"A counter-game, Jimmie," said Boyd more gravely. "I want to keep my head on my shoulders, even admitting it to be a cabbage-head."

"The dickens! Has it come to that pass?"

"Nothing less," replied Boyd, with a nod. "Sit down and I'll tell you about it. There are parties out after my pelt, after it in dead earnest; yet I don't mean to let them get it. Still, the racket has been a bit strenuous of late, and no mistake. Close calls are coming early and often."

"On the level, Felix?" demanded Coleman seriously.

"My statement is on the level, Jimmie, if that's what you mean. Not so, however, the several recent attempts to turn my toes up. They were far from on the level. Let's see, to-day is Saturday, isn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Yes, of course," laughed Boyd rather grimly. "The fact is, Jimmie, I've been so deucedly occupied in looking after my head that I may have lost my reckoning."

"Humph! Not you, Felix Boyd!" returned Coleman, dropping into a chair. "Danger serves only to sharpen your wits, that I'll swear to. What about Saturday?"

"Well, Jimmie, Saturday's little move hasn't been made yet, so I cannot tell just what it may prove to be," replied Boyd. "Wednesday's was rather exhilarating, however."

"What was that?"

"Oh, merely an incident. As I was passing the stone

building on the corner of Bond Street, just before dusk, I heard something sing by my ear, and smash itself out of shape against the wall. I felt enough interest to war-rant picking it up, and I found it to be a chunk of lead."

"Not a bullet!" cried Coleman.

"Nothing less," answered Boyd. "A bullet from an air-pistol, evidently, since I had heard no report. My head was the target, Jimmie, or the marksman was a deucedly bad shot. I made a bluff at looking him up, but such miscreants cover themselves well when taking such chances, and my quest proved vain. It doesn't matter much, however, since he missed me."

"Yes——"

"Wait a bit, Jimmie," smiled Boyd oddly. "Late Thursday evening, while crossing Fifth Avenue, I was struck by an automobile, and tossed some twenty feet to the park wall. The chauffeur meant to do even better than that, and toss me into the hereafter, but luckily I had my eyes open and saw him swerve suddenly in my direction. He was off and gone before I could gather up my agitated remains."

"Could you identify——"

"Identify nothing!" interposed Boyd grimly. "I had only time to see where I could land to the best advantage."

"But——"

"Wait once more, Jimmie. On Friday morning, as I was passing near the staging of that building now being demolished on Forty-first Street, a piece of blocking weighing about a hundred pounds fell down, and struck the pavement some eight inches behind me. I looked up and saw—nobody! It might have been an accident, eh?"

"Not by a long chalk!" cried Coleman, with much indignation. "I should say, indeed, that parties are out after your pelt. Why, Boyd, this is outrageous."

"Oh, no; only a bit stimulating," laughed Boyd, reaching for his pipe. "It serves to keep one alert. This plugging in a bran-new move against a man's life each day is rather interesting. One grows curious to know how soon they will exhaust their ingenuity. As I remarked, I hardly know what to-day's move will be.

Dynamite, like enough. Or, since it's a short business day, and to-morrow the Sabbath, they may let up until Monday."

Coleman gravely shook his head.

"Levity aside, Felix, what do you make of this?" said he. "Do you attribute these dastardly attempts to Wykoff, or the gang with which you think him identified?"

"Decidedly so," nodded Boyd, through a wreath of smoke. "But I suspect that these designs upon my life emanate from a far greater knave than Paul Wykoff. As I told you after that Dickson case, Jimmie, I wished to remain as much as possible in the background, lest the master criminal in these operations below the deadline should get a range on me before I had one on him."

"No sign of it yet, eh?"

"Not a line that I can run down, Jimmie. I have shadowed both Wykoff and that Dole girl to the top of my bent, yet nothing comes of it, and you know I'm neither blind nor green at such business."

"Well, I should say not."

"They make not a move that serves me for a pointer. Yet it's plain as two and two that this gang, or the chief of it, now entertains a very profound respect for me, if not a feeling of genuine fear, since I queered that cipher robbery for him and come so near landing Wykoff. They want me out of the way, Jimmie, there's no doubt about that."

"I should say as much," growled Coleman thoughtfully. "Is there no way by which I can help you?"

"Not at present, thanks. I mean to let these knaves have what rope they want, in the hope that I may yet get hold of one end of it," smiled Boyd.

"But the end of it may prove to be the end of you, Felix."

"Possibly. Yet I'll take the chances. I don't feel as if I should go under at the hands of a mongrel who stabs in the dark."

"God forbid! Yet the odds plainly are great. This gang must comprise many shrewd and desperate hands, since you are so cleverly watched and frequently threatened."

"No doubt at all of it, Jimmie," assented Boyd. "And

their director-general is a past grand master of crime, I am equally certain. It is proving difficult, indeed, to land him; but wait until I get a clue which—ah, well, we shall see!"

As if loath to make an idle boast, Boyd abruptly checked himself, and resumed his pipe, at which he puffed complacently for several moments; yet the drawn lines of his thin, firm lips, the knitting of his brows and the steel-like gleam of his cold gray eyes, betrayed the inflexible determination he had refrained from expressing.

The central office detective, familiar though he was with brave associates, and used to deeds of daring, could not but admire this man whose surpassing courage he so many times had seen exemplified, and who faced hidden perils as one might face a morning breeze. Aside from his keen discernment and rare detective art, Boyd's every quality was such as wins the love of men like Coleman, and inspires the deepest fear of such knaves as they had been discussing.

"I don't like this work a cent, Felix," growled Coleman, after some moments. "If you were one of the force, I should insist upon working with you and sharing your chances. As it is, you refuse to allow it?"

"Most decidedly, Jimmie," Boyd gravely answered. "My work is not quite in a line with yours, Jimmie, and my contracts do not require me to run down criminals. If I finally land this obscure gang now operating below the dead-line, it will be done only incidentally; yet I think it quite probable, and very likely with your help. Let that suffice, dear fellow."

"I have no alternative," replied Coleman slowly. "But what was your game down in K— Street this morning? You haven't explained that. Holy smoke, what a make-up that was!"

Boyd laughed lightly, and laid aside his pipe.

"Well, Jimmie," said he oddly, "I was watching for the man who vanished."

"The man who vanished!" echoed Coleman amazedly. "What the dickens do you mean by the—man who vanished?"

"I'll explain," replied Boyd, moving nearer in his chair.

"Last Tuesday, Jimmie, I discovered that I was being shadowed. The party who betrayed this unusual interest in my movements was a total stranger to me. I decided that I had better learn something about him, he hung so long at my heels; and late Tuesday afternoon I managed, after having secretly prepared myself, to turn the tables on him."

"Quite right. That was just the thing to do."

"I did it, moreover, without his suspecting it," continued Boyd. "He suddenly lost sight of me, Jimmie, and I presently emerged from a near saloon, so effectually disguised that my wife, if I had one, would not have known me."

"I see."

"I had the fellow under my eye, however; yet up to that time he cannot possibly have learned that I suspected him. He plainly was trying to locate me again, and I followed him about for a time, and presently into K—— Street."

"Where I saw you this morning?"

"Not far removed," nodded Boyd. "Nearly opposite that alley where you mistook me for a son of sunny Italy, there is a small shop occupied by a man who cleans and repairs men's clothing—a man named Broger, or so his sign states. He has occupied the shop about six months."

"I know the shop," bowed Coleman. "But not the man."

"Well, Jimmie, my man went into that shop," continued Boyd. "I waited awhile for him to come out, and when he failed to do so I felt so sure of my disguise that I decided to enter after him; to learn quietly who he was, if possible, and to have a look at the place itself."

"I see," remarked Coleman.

"Well, I didn't!" returned Boyd, with a queer intonation. "Jimmie, the shop has no rear door, no rear window; in fact, no visible way of exit save that by which I had entered; and yet, Jimmie——"

"Well?"

"My man was not there!"

"Not there!"

"Decidedly not. He had vanished."

"Did you make any inquiries?" asked Coleman perplexedly.

"Only about the cost of cleaning and pressing the suit I then had on."

"Why not more?"

"Because, Jimmie, the incident was so peculiar, along with the fact that I had been so persistently shadowed, that I did not wish to betray any misgivings by asking pertinent questions," explained Boyd. "The shop is only a small one, and as I saw Broger there when my man entered, I cannot have been fooled by any lightning change."

"Naturally not."

"If my man was concealed in a closet or under a counter, well and good, perhaps. If not, things there may not be so well and good. That's all, Jimmie. Yet do me the favor to keep away from that shop until I have again located the man who vanished."

"Certainly, Felix, if you really wish it," nodded Coleman. "Have you since been watching the place?"

"Frequently."

"Seen any others come or go?"

"Only persons whom I since have learned to be genuine customers, and not at all worthy of serious suspicion."

"Humph!" grunted Coleman. "This whole business appears deucedly odd."

"It is so odd that I shall leave no stone unturned to discover what it means," Boyd grimly answered.

Then glancing at his desk, he quickly added:

"By the way, Jimmie, reverting to what I might expect to-day in the way of an innovation, here is a wire I received about ten o'clock from Grimshaw & Co., Boston brokers. Do you know them?"

"Never heard of them."

"Following the wire came a long-distance telephone call from Grimshaw himself, with whom I had a short interview. He referred me to Morgan, of Wall Street, for whom he once worked. He wishes me to come to Boston to-night to investigate a mysterious theft from his office. I could not get the particulars over the wire, however; yet he offers me a very good price."

"Are you going?"

Boyd smiled oddly, and arose to take his hat.

"I have not decided," said he. "I told Grimshaw that I would wire him this afternoon. Perhaps, after looking him up, I may decide to go. A change of base for a day or two may set my would-be assassins guessing."

"Not a bad idea."

"If I decide to go, however," added Boyd, "I would like to see you before leaving. Drop in here again at four o'clock, Jimmie, will you?"

"Yes, at four sharp. Where now?"

"To lunch. Had yours?"

"Yes, yes; an hour ago."

"See me at four, then. So long!"

And Mr. Felix Boyd nodded and laughed as he moved away, quite as if he ignored the fact that his life at that very moment might be hanging by a thread.

II.

At the exclusive French restaurant patronized by Mr. Felix Boyd, chiefly because it was a favorite resort of many of the wealthy bankers and brokers with whose interests he was concerned, there were but few late lunchers in the second-floor dining-room to which he habitually repaired. At one of the tables, however, he discovered an acquaintance, the head bookkeeper of the Trinity Trust Company, and he bowed and joined him, taking the opposite chair.

"You may find poor company better than none, Sanderson," said he genially, as he sat down. "How are you?"

"Very well, Boyd. Glad to see you. Anything new?"

"Nothing worth telling—save that the world has grown honest," quoth Boyd, laughing. "I find hardly enough doing to keep me busy. Affairs all right down your way?"

"As far as I know," replied Sanderson. "If not, we should expect you to inform us," he added, smiling.

"You people seem to think I am a clairvoyant, and

able to anticipate any sort of knavery that threatens your interests," Boyd dryly observed.

"Why, yes; certainly."

"If your vault was to be blown to atoms some dark night, and looted of its contents, I suppose I should be hauled over the coals for not having foreseen and prevented it."

"I think it very likely," laughed Sanderson. "We are on your list of clients, and it's up to you to guard us against such a crime."

"Very reasonable, I am sure," laughed Boyd. "Well, well; let's not anticipate such a disaster. There is a saying that men get what they are looking for, so we will look for something better than a bank burglary. Late hour for you to be at lunch on a Saturday, isn't it?"

Sanderson glanced up at the handsome clock on the elaborately decorated wall. It already was after three.

"Quite so," said he. "I am more than an hour late."

"Very busy striking a balance for the week, I take it."

"Well, not unusually so," was the reply. "The fact is, Boyd, I have been testing my mental powers in a way. Curious, too; I'm blessed if it wasn't."

"How so?"

"Why, it happened in this way," explained Sanderson, while he concluded his lunch. "An acquaintance of mine named Kramer, who rents an office in our building, came to my window just before noon, and asked me to place his tin box in our vault over Sunday, as he was going out of town. It contained some bonds recently sent him to be negotiated, and a few valuables which he did not wish to leave in his own office over Sunday."

"Has he no safe in his office?" inquired Boyd.

"No, he has not; so I frequently have favored him in this way."

"New York man?"

"I am not sure about that, only that he is the New York agent for a lime concern of Rockland, Maine. He has friends in Bridgeport, whom he occasionally visits for a day or two, and at such times he always leaves his box of securities in my care—no great trouble for me, you know. As he is rather a genial fellow, and also a tenant of ours, I try to accommodate him."

"Very natural, I am sure," nodded Boyd. "But where did the exercise of your mental powers come in?"

Sanderson laughed, and laid aside his napkin.

"I'll tell you," said he. "Among other things, Kramer had placed in his box a small, gold-embossed clock, quite a valuable little ornament, which was given him by his fiancée. I have seen it on his desk several times, and do not wonder that he prizes it quite highly."

"A clock, eh?"

"Precisely. The curious feature of the circumstances, however, lies in the fact that its constant ticking in the tin box, which I temporarily placed on my desk, rather annoyed me while I balanced my books. My first impulse was to place the box in the vault, and so rid myself of the noise. It occurred to me, however, that I ought to be able to concentrate my mind on my work despite so trivial a disturbance, and I resolved to try to do so."

"Ah, I see."

"Well, Boyd," and Sanderson broke out laughing, "I'm blessed if that ticking didn't annoy me so that I was good ninety minutes longer than usual in closing up my books. If I went to the devil, I couldn't add a column correctly the first time. I beat out the infernal little timepiece at the finish, however; but not until all of my associates in the bank had wound up their work and departed. Then I placed Kramer's deuced box on the floor of the vault, where I hope it may tick itself dumb before Monday. That, Boyd, is why I am so late at lunch to-day."

Boyd's clean-cut features did not change perceptibly while he listened, yet away down in the depths of his cold, gray eyes there was a gleam not there before.

"Remain a few moments, Sanderson," said he carelessly. "I do not enjoy lunching alone. In no great hurry, are you?"

"Not particularly."

"Sit until I have finished my soup, then. Do you know, Sanderson, I often find it difficult to concentrate my mind for any long period. It's not an easy thing to do."

"I certainly found it difficult," smiled the other, per-

ceiving no artifice on Boyd's part. "I suffered my mind to cheat my stomach a full hour."

"You were the last to leave the bank, eh?" inquired Boyd, glancing indifferently over the several occupants of the room, to make sure he knew them, and was not being watched by any stranger.

"The very last," nodded Sanderson. "Yet that is not unusual. I frequently am the last to leave."

"You close the vault in that case, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"Are the vault doors secured by a combination-lock or by a time-lock?"

"A time-lock, Mr. Boyd. It now is set for nine o'clock Monday morning. Until that day and hour, Boyd, the devil himself could not open that vault, which is one of the best in the city."

"Until that day and hour, then," quietly observed Felix Boyd, with a curious smile, "the time-lock on the vault door, and Kramer's valuable little clock reposing securely in his tin box, may merrily tick away the seconds in genial company."

"Just so," laughed Sanderson. "Bright thought, that."

"Friend of yours, this Kramer, did you say?"

"Acquaintance, rather. I have known him only about two months, since he became our tenant."

"Young man?"

"About forty, I should say. A genial fellow. Taken me to the theater several times, with a bird and bottle to follow; complimentary, no doubt, in recognition of my little favors."

"Yes, very likely," said Boyd, with unappreciated dryness.

"Well, I'll now be off. Glad to have seen you, Mr. Boyd."

"You are dead lucky to have seen me—far luckier than you imagine!" Boyd mentally observed, as Sanderson departed. "Yet the luck is not all his, not quite all; since a slice of it comes my way."

The light in his keen, gray eyes was burning brighter, at times intensely. A look of serious concern now and then appeared in his fine, forceful face. He finished his

soup in a hurry, and countermanded his order for subsequent courses.

Having paid his bill and emerged to the street, however, he betrayed no further sign of his unusual mental activity. That the eyes of a spy might be watching him at every available moment, he now had scarce a doubt. Without a suspicious glance in any direction, however, he moderately proceeded to his office in Pine Street, where self-restraint was not deemed quite so imperative.

"My grip, Terry," he cried sharply, addressing his office boy. "Look lively!"

"Something on, eh?" ventured the lad, hastening to bring a stout leather bag from the closet.

"Either that or I am away off my—ah, but I am not! It must be that—it must be that!"

"Must be what, sir?"

"Don't bother me with questions. Here, send this wire; then return at once. Wait——"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't betray any haste. Crafty eyes may observe you, and shrewd deductions be drawn."

"All right, sir. I'm wise."

"Be off, then."

The lad vanished.

Boyd sprang up from his desk, at which he had written a despatch to Grimshaw & Co., stating that he would leave for Boston by the Fall River line that afternoon.

"The boat goes at five," he muttered, glancing at his watch. "It now is nearly four. Just about time to make ready."

Entering the small side room adjoining, in which he kept a wardrobe that would have stirred the envy of the most versatile character-actor of the age, he quickly packed in his grip a disguise to be used a little later, and included also a brace of trusty revolvers.

He had just secured the last strap about the bag, when Terry Gowan returned, followed a few moments later by Jimmie Coleman.

"Hello!" exclaimed the detective, who observed the grip. "Have you decided to go to Boston?"

"I have decided to make a bluff at it, Jimmie," Boyd quickly answered.

"A bluff at it! What do you mean?" demanded Coleman, startled less by the announcement than by the ominous ring in Boyd's subdued voice.

"I have only time to give you a hint at what I mean, Jimmie," Boyd hurriedly answered. "There's a devil's own game afoot. That wire from Grimshaw is only a decoy, a scheme to get me out of New York over Sunday."

"The dickens!"

"Their more serious attempts upon my life having failed, that wire was the last resort of this coterie of knaves, by which to insure my absence at the culmination of their long-protracted work. It shows that they fear me, Jimmie; fear me beyond telling—and not without reason! I will land them yet—land them yet, the renegades!"

"Good heavens!" cried Coleman, amazed at Boyd's rare display of feeling. "What do you now suspect?"

"I must tell you in a nutshell, Jimmie, for time presses," cried Boyd. "Come here, Terry. Draw nearer, both of you. I'll quickly tell you what I suspect, and give you my instructions. They must be followed to the letter—to the letter, mind you! Millions may depend upon it! Listen—listen!"

His voice fell almost to a whisper, thrilling his hearers with its suppressed intensity. Their amazement at what he imparted was even greater, however; and Coleman stared dumfounded while he signified his willing cooperation in the stirring sequence of events that quickly followed, born of the remarkable discernment and keen deductions of Mr. Felix Boyd.

III.

At quarter-past four that afternoon, Jimmie Coleman sauntered out of Boyd's office, and proceeded up-town to carry out the latter's instructions.

At half-past four Mr. Felix Boyd came down to Pine Street, tossed his grip into a hansom for which he had telephoned, and went directly to pier twenty-eight, where

he purchased a ticket for Boston, engaging a stateroom, and at once boarded the palatial steamer *Puritan*.

At five minutes of five, just before the steamer's gang-plank was hauled ashore, a youngster bearing but little resemblance to Terry Gowan came off the boat with a grip, and lugged it away up Warren Street. The lad was Terry Gowan, nevertheless, and the grip that of Mr. Felix Boyd.

When the steamer drew out of the dock, Boyd occupied a prominent position on the saloon-deck aft, where he could be plainly seen by any person on the pier having an interest in his departure. That he then was booked for Newport, at least, no sane person could reasonably have doubted.

Thereupon a man clad as a stevedore, who had been lounging near the trucks and freight on the pier, abruptly turned away and departed. The last object on which his gaze lingered, however, as the *Puritan* veered round toward the Battery, was the clean-cut, athletic figure of a man on her after-deck—that of Mr. Felix Boyd.

The sun was running low in the west, lending a glare and glisten to the waters of the river and bay. As the steamer rounded the Battery and entered East River, the lengthened shadows of the towering buildings fell athwart the stream, giving it a darker aspect; and then Boyd descended to the lower saloon, just as the steamer plowed her way under Brooklyn Bridge, and presently he stole aft through the narrow way between the vessel's house and her bulwarks, until he reached a point directly over her stern. It was a location from which passengers ordinarily are excluded, and where he was not at all likely to be observed.

For Boyd had no intention of leaving New York that day, despite his exceeding pains to have it appear that he had departed. As the steamer passed Greenpoint, a light skiff, propelled by two stalwart oarsmen, shot out from one of the docks at Hunter's Point, and shaped a course toward the middle of the stream, lying to half a cable's-length from the *Puritan's* starboard side as she swept by.

Well out of observation, Boyd was watching to sight this skiff. As he came abreast of her some fifty yards

away, he waved his hand to one of the oarsmen. Then he buttoned his coat close around him, and plunged like an arrow over the aft bulwarks and into the steamer's surging wake.

In the swish and swirl of turbulent water he was submerged so long that the two men in the skiff began to hold their breath with apprehension. Then he came to the surface, far astern of the steamer, by no occupants of which his startling feat had been observed, and the two men bent lustily to their oars to pick him up.

"Good enough, Jimmie!" he panted, as he clambered over the stern and spat the brine from his throat. "I guess we have fooled any spy upon my movements. The way now is clear, and the end assured."

Coleman laughed, and winked over his shoulder at his brother detective in the bow, as the two sent the skiff flying toward the dock from which they had put out.

"Boyd leaves no loopholes open, Akerman," he observed, with quiet approval. "A less clever man would have left the steamer in disguise, after boarding her, or have had her hove to and been taken off after leaving."

"Humph!" grunted Boyd, wringing the water from his coat. "Too much at stake, Jimmie, to take those chances. I am too greatly feared, and have been too closely watched during the past week. When criminals take such long chances to send me down and out, it's a safe gamble that they will watch my movements up to the last moment."

"That's right, old man."

"Hence it was imperative that they should feel dead sure that I had run into their net and departed for Boston, lest they became doubly cautious as their job neared its culmination. Now, thinking me well out of the way, they will go at it hammer and tongs, and we must nail them in the very act, when all hands are employed on the job itself."

"But what is this job?" growled Akerman. "Are you dead sure that you are on the right track?"

"We are sure of nothing in this world but death and taxes," said Boyd dryly. "Yet if evidence is worth anything, and brains, I shall—ah, but we shall see."

"Better make him wise to it, Felix," suggested Coleman. "The boys will feel better if they know just what they are going up against."

"Have you got them all together?" inquired Boyd.

"Every man of them; six, besides Akerman and myself. They are waiting at Clancey's house, one of the regulars."

"Very good," nodded Boyd. "I will inform them when we arrive there."

Half-an-hour later, clad in the dry garments which he had packed in his grip, Boyd disclosed his suspicions to the eight stalwart men placed at his command by the central office, and who were then gathered at the Brooklyn residence of one of their number. His influence over men at such a time was very strong, and while all recognized the peculiar character of the incidents he disclosed, as herein described, none at once perceived their startling significance. Boyd quickly observed this, and hastened to reveal his own shrewd deductions.

"I am convinced, boys, that a big job lies back of all this," said he. "Whether I am right as to its character, or right at all, remains for us to discover. Note the points in the case, as I run them over. I have been closely shadowed since last Tuesday, and several attempts have been made to take my life, all of which plainly indicates that I am seriously feared at just this time, and probably by a gang of criminals whose operations I repeatedly have foiled."

"There's little doubt of that, boys," declared Coleman, with a corroborative nod at the group of detectives seated about the room.

"The wire calling me from town to-day," continued Boyd, "further shows that this is the day on which they particularly want me out of their way, which strongly indicates that a job of some kind is very near its culmination."

"That's reasonable enough," admitted Akerman. "But how do you get at the job itself, and when and where it's to be done?"

"I will tell you," said Boyd, suppressing a smile. "I got my first clue from the man who visited Broger's shop, in K—— Street."

"The man who vanished?"

"Precisely."

"He must have gone somewhere."

"And the fact that he did not leave by the door, which plainly was the only ordinary way of exit, at once suggests that he may have gone into a cellar," declared Boyd quite pointedly. "That he did precisely that, and with designs suggested by the clue I struck to-day, I already am quite convinced."

"What clue do you mean, Mr. Boyd?"

"That suggested by the tin box deposited by Kramer in the vault of the Trinity Trust Company," Boyd quickly answered. "Note how carefully the way was prepared for deceiving Sanderson, and averting any misgivings on his part. This Kramer rents of the Trinity people, has an office without a safe, and has succeeded in making a friend of Sanderson by taking him to the theater now and then, and the like of that. Several times Sanderson has been asked by Kramer to care for the tin box in the manner described, yet never with any unusual results. On this occasion, however, he claims to have placed in his box a valuable little clock, to which he previously had called Sanderson's attention, stating that he prized it very highly. Sanderson heard it ticking in the box before he placed the latter on the floor of the vault."

"Well, well; suppose he did," growled Akerman. "We all know that, or have heard you tell it. But what of it?"

"This of it, Akerman!" exclaimed Boyd, with a subtle flush of his earnest, gray eyes. "The ticking Sanderson heard may not have been that of a clock. Take my word for it, Akerman; it was nothing of the kind."

"What the devil was it, then?"

"A hundred-to-one shot," cried Boyd; "the ticking was that of another kind of a mechanism concealed in the box—a mechanism for exploding a charge of dynamite at a fixed hour."

"An infernal machine!" roared Akerman, catching the idea.

"Wait a bit, gentlemen!" Boyd sharply commanded. "The force of that violent explosive always works in a downward direction. Note me, now! The rear of Bro-

ger's shop is within twenty yards of the rear of the building occupied by the Trinity Trust Company. If a tunnel between them exists, and if the floor of the vault had been weakened by subterranean work, and if a heavy charge of dynamite were to be exploded on the vault floor at some hour to-night—well, well, gentlemen, I observe that you now see the point!"

Several of his hearers had leaped up in lively excitement when the startling possibilities were thus brought home to them, and one impulsively cried:

"By all the gods, Boyd, you are right! We must get at the interior of that vault at once."

"On the contrary, Mr. Hadley; you will take your orders from me," said Boyd, with polite firmness.

"Is that so, sir?"

"Decidedly so! As for opening the vault to remove Mr. Kramer's tin box, in order to prove our case, that is utterly impossible. The vault is secured with a time-lock, and it cannot be opened until nine o'clock next Monday morning."

"But, man alive, before that time——"

"Before that time, Mr. Hadley," interrupted Boyd, with a slight frown, "the explosion will occur, and the floor of the vault be blown to pieces. Quite right, sir; assuming that our deductions are correct. Yet it now is impossible to prevent the explosion. It is precisely what I expect, and precisely what I propose to be on hand to witness."

"But——"

"One word more, gentlemen, if you please," firmly insisted Boyd, still with some suavity. "Men of your experience should not require advice from me. You should know that this break, if there is to be one, will be completed soon after twelve to-night, at which hour the building is always deserted."

"And what are your plans, Felix?" asked Jimmie Coleman.

"Between twelve and one to-night we must be in K—— Street, with the entire block guarded to prevent any escape," declared Boyd decisively. "Then we first must make sure we are right, and next make sure of our

game. Resume your seats, gentlemen, and I will give you my instructions."

The plans laid then and there by Felix Boyd did not mature until after midnight. At that hour the sky was heavily clouded, and the streets of the banking-district were deserted and dark, when compared with the life and light in other precincts of the city.

At twelve-thirty, Boyd and Jimmie Coleman, both in disguise, came from the alley opposite Broger's shop, and quietly crossed the street. The windows of the shop were covered with wooden shutters, yet a chink of light showed that a lamp burned feebly within, and Boyd at once rapped softly on the door.

For a moment silence only followed the knock. Then, much as if some one within had paused briefly to listen, and felt reassured by the cautious quietude over the floor, a voice whispered sharply through the keyhole of the door:

"Who's there?"

Boyd bent down to answer, crying softly:

"Is that you, Broger?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I've got a message for one of the gang—Wykoff!" whispered Boyd, taking a chance of hitting the nail on the head.

"He's here, but—but who sends you?"

"A fat question, you fool, to expect me to answer through an oak door," Boyd harshly growled. "Open it, you dog, and I'll tell you."

His authoritative accents had the desired effect, for Broger now opened the door a few inches, disclosing his frowzy head, and quickly demanded:

"Do you come from the Big Finger?"

"The Big Finger—yes, of course! Let us in! Do you want me to blow the whole business out of doors? I've got a message for Wykoff. Where is he?"

A gleam of mingled fear and suspicion rose in Broger's eyes when the two men pressed into the dimly lighted shop, and his involuntary glance at the floor some feet away, when he replied, told Boyd in what direction to seek the man mentioned.

"You wait here," said Broger. "I don't know either of you——"

"We are in disguise, you blockhead. I want Wykoff. When was the Big Finger here last, and who——"

"I'm not answering questions," snarled Broger resentfully. "You wait a bit. I'll call Wykoff, and see if——"

"You have a look at this, instead!" Boyd sternly interrupted, seizing the man's arm and quickly thrusting a revolver under his nose. "Careful—do not open your mouth, Broger! If you do, I'll send a lead pill down your rascally throat, which you'll never disgest in this world. The bracelets, Jimmie! Both hands, Broger; if you please. Now you're right, and secure as a drum. Run him at once, Jimmie, and turn him over to Clancey. Hurry back, old man!"

When Coleman presently returned he found Felix Boyd on his knees at the rear of the shop, peering through a trap-door at a ladder leading down to a dark cellar.

"The lamp, Jimmie," he quickly whispered. "I'll go down ahead, then you pass me the lamp and follow."

As Coleman descended through the trap, two burly central office men appeared at the door, and softly entered the shop. At each corner of the square occupied by the Trust building, moreover, two officers then were waiting and watching.

By the light of the lamp, Boyd glanced sharply around the cellar. Huge mounds of dirt on all sides confirmed his suspicions.

"There's a tunnel here all right, Jimmie," he whispered. "And the entrance to it must be through the rear wall. Bring the lamp this way."

The foundation wall at first appeared to be intact, yet Boyd's keen eyes soon discovered the break.

"There's a light beyond this wall, Jimmie," he muttered. "Ha! here's a section that swings this way. Put out the lamp, old man."

"Out she goes," chuckled Coleman softly.

For a moment they stood in Egyptian darkness. Then Boyd cautiously drew open the section he had discovered, and by the yellowish glare of an incandescent light

there then was revealed a subterranean passage, fully fifty feet long, and running under the area back of Broger's shop. At the farther end of it could be seen another foundation wall, partly broken away; but not a sign of any person was in evidence.

"The knaves have done a big job, and done it well," whispered Boyd. "That farther wall is that of the Trust building, and the break in it is just under the rear of the vault. The scoundrels even have tapped some wire, to light the place. But where the dickens are they now?"

"Not in sight, surely," growled Coleman, under his breath.

"We'll see where the passage leads. There may be a divergent section, in which they are now at work. Follow me, Jimmie, and have your gun ready."

"Ready she is, Felix."

Together the two men left Broger's cellar, and entered the tunnel. Yet they scarce had set foot in it when the prediction of Felix Boyd was verified.

There came an explosion which seemed to shake the earth, and with it a blinding flash of light. As he reeled backward under the sudden awful shock, Boyd saw the distant wall give way for several feet, and a section of the vault floor ruptured like so much tissue paper.

For several moments a thick veil of smoke obscured the passage. Before it fairly had begun to clear, however, a voice which Boyd instantly recognized to be that of Paul Wykoff rang through the farther end of the passage.

"This way, pals!" he shouted triumphantly. "The job's done! The plunder is ours, for a ducat!"

Through the veil of smoke, Boyd saw his tall, lithe figure, as he came from a divergent passage, and sprang upon the rocks which had fallen from the wall. He was followed closely by two other men, and Boyd drew his second revolver.

"At them, Jimmie!" he cried softly. "If they show fight, shoot to kill!"

He started through the passage while he spoke, and his last word was mingled with a yell of dismay from Wykoff.

"By God, we're done up!" he fairly shrieked. "The cops are on us! Out by that way, boys!"

The two men behind him vanished like a flash. As Wykoff leaped from the rocks, however, Boyd's revolver rang like thunder through the confined place, and the burglar fell with a bullet in his hip, unable to rise when Boyd rushed through the smoke and approached him.

"Look after him, Jimmie!" he shouted. "I'll follow the others!"

As he had suspected, a divergent passage led off to the right. It was in darkness, however, and Boyd could follow it only with difficulty. Not a sound from the men he pursued reached his ears, and he presently came to a heavy wooden bulkhead, which was securely closed. He guessed the truth at once—that this way of escape had been provided against just such an emergency as that described.

Under cover of the darkness, despite the vigilance of the waiting officers, the two burglars who had fled succeeded in making their escape. Paul Wykoff and Broger, however, were promptly taken into camp, and the Sunday editions of the New York papers contained full-page stories of the extraordinary work done by the central office.

For Felix Boyd still chose to remain as much as possible in the background.

"It is wisest and safest at present, Jimmie, and there is a chance that I may not be connected with this job, since neither Wykoff nor Broger knew me," he explained to Coleman, a few days later.

"I think so, too, Felix," admitted Coleman; "yet I'm rather averse to taking so much credit for your own remarkable work."

"Take it and welcome, Jimmie," laughed Boyd. "I still have my head to consider, remember that, while I am seeking that obscure party dubbed the Big Finger. Neither Wykoff nor Broger, though they now are booked for Sing Sing, will betray their confederates, that's already plain enough. As for Kramer, Grimshaw, and the others concerned in this job, they have vanished like bubbles. Yet I have an idea that we yet shall land them, one and all—indeed, I have!"

The Case of the Big Finger.

I.

"Mystery—that's the word!" exclaimed Mr. Felix Boyd. "To honest people there is no world so dark and mysterious as that in which criminals live and plan their nefarious work. Truly, Jimmie, it is the devil's own workshop."

"There's no doubt of that, Felix," admitted Coleman.

"A strangely potent factor, moreover, is the atmosphere of mystery with which a master criminal often surrounds himself. It both hides him from the sleuths of the law, like yourself, Jimmie, and inspires his confederates with an awe and subservience well calculated to prevent treachery. This element of mystery always has been recognized as a mighty power, Jimmie, and it has been applied for good or evil through centuries and by all classes, from the supreme dignitary of the church down to the most vicious denizen of the under-world."

"I guess that's right, Felix, but the philosophy of the thing is a little out of my line," laughed the central office man, while he knocked the ashes from his cigar.

As chronicler of the exploits of Mr. Felix Boyd below the dead-line, it is not always easy to select from among his many achievements those cases which best exemplify his remarkable work; and that here narrated, rather than being directly in line with his special duties, presents the extraordinary circumstances under which he encountered that master criminal, against whose superior craft and daring his own talents were opposed, and who figured in nearly every great crime of that strenuous period. Yet the case itself had features of peculiar interest.

"Mystery—yes, that's the word, Jimmie," repeated Boyd, smiling at Coleman's observation. "It has a very

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practical side, moreover, when we consider our futile efforts to discover the party responsible for the long series of crimes attempted in this locality. Since that Trinity Trust affair, for which we landed Wykoff and that man Broger in Sing Sing, I have been more than ever in the dark."

"That was only two weeks ago," rejoined Coleman. "It's hardly time for this gang to begin getting in their work again. Or perhaps that was a body blow, and they have decided to quit for a spell."

"Not likely, Jimmie. The knave who directed those operations is not a quitter."

"Yet he may, as you once thought, stand seriously in fear of you, Felix, since you have queered so many of his projects," suggested Coleman. "In that case he may be watching for an opportunity to turn you down."

"Possibly," Boyd dryly admitted.

"Have there been any further attempts upon your life?"

"Not since the Trinity Trust affair. I have been a bit guarded, since, and they will find me loaded for bear if they again attempt to throw me down. Their crafty and despicable methods——"

"Oh, I say, Mr. Boyd, here's a queer advertisement. Shall I read it to you, sir?"

The interruption came from Terry Gowan, the lad employed in Boyd's office, where the three were seated that morning. As usual, the lad's occupation at that hour was that of examining the morning newspapers, in search of any curious or significant personal or notice, which not unfrequently is made the means of communication between professional crooks, as well as others a little less culpable.

Boyd glanced at him, remarking indifferently:

"Struck something Terry? Yes, you may read it."

From the want columns of the morning *Journal*, the lad read aloud the following:

"WANTED.—Tip for Lingerie. New Rookery. Pass Woodcock. Gig 10-11-12. Last drawing. Take one in black, and drop one in brown. Ring on the Big Finger."

"What's that last?" cried Boyd sharply.

"Ring on the Big Finger," repeated Terry, glancing up. Boyd's indifference had vanished like dew before the sun. He reached forward and seized the newspaper, which he spread open upon his desk, and for several moments intently studied the curious advertisement.

Coleman also drew forward to read it, remarking:

"It appears to hit you between wind and water, Felix. Can you make anything of it?"

"It does hit me, Jimmie," muttered Boyd, with eyes evincing his quickened interest. "Have you forgotten what that crook, Broger, asked me, when I forced my way into his shop in K—— Street, on the night of the Trinity Trust case?"

"What was that? I don't think I recall it."

"He asked me if I came with a message from the Big Finger."

"By Jove, that's so!" exclaimed Coleman. "I now remember it. This looks, indeed, as if this gang had again got down to work."

"It has that appearance."

"Can you make anything of that rigmarole?"

"Give me time," cried Boyd, reaching for his pipe. "There is no alternative—I must make something of it! If there is another game afoot, I must learn of what it consists, and be in at the finish. Give me time, I say."

"Take all the time you require," laughed Coleman a bit derisively. "If you can make any sense of that verbal lobsconse, Felix, you will do better than I could."

"That will not surprise me, Jimmie," retorted Boyd, with countenance lighting. "At least one probability appears quite plain at the outset."

"What probability?"

"That this notice was inserted by the same person to whom Broger referred as the Big Finger."

"Why so?"

"Because the term is by no means a common one. It is sometimes used as a slang nickname applied to a boss, a superintendent, or a chief of some kind. That the term is so seldom used, Jimmie, at once indicates that Broger referred to the same Big Finger here mentioned. In that case, take my word for it, Jimmie, this Big Finger

The Big Finger.

is neither more nor less than chief of the gang of criminals with which Broger and Paul Wykoff were identified."

"The very man we are after."

"Precisely."

"By Jove! there may be something in that, Felix," said Coleman more gravely. "But the notice reads—'Ring on the Big Finger.' What's the significance of the ring?"

"In my opinion, the first two words cut no ice," declared Boyd. "They were added only for a blind. While this chief crook aimed to have some person know that he published this notice, he also avoided expressing himself too significantly. Hence, he thus concluded the notice, instead of plainly signing it the Big Finger."

"You may be right."

"I would give odds that I am," muttered Boyd, whose gaze not once had left the curious advertisement. "It is the work of our master criminal, take my word for it."

"But why does he communicate with parties in this fashion?"

"Why does any man publish such a notice? Only in order to communicate with some person not easily or safely approached openly. Plainly, Jimmie, this Big Finger wants something of somebody."

"He wants a tip for Lingerie," growled Coleman perplexedly. "What the devil is Lingerie—a race-horse? Is he going to place a bet on——"

"No, no; hold on! I have it!" cried Boyd, with an excitement betraying his intense mental application. "Lingerie—that's petticoats! And petticoats signify a woman! It's as plain as two and two, Jimmie. This man wants to interview some woman for whom he has a tip. In other words, this chief crook invites a visit from some woman, to whom he wishes to give instructions."

"Eureka!" exclaimed Coleman. "That's the correct interpretation for a ducat."

"I think so, Jimmie."

"Felix, you've got a head as long as that of a four-footed beast."

"Wait a bit!" cried Boyd impatiently. "Let's see what follows. New Rookery! A rookery is a place inhab-

ited by rooks. A rook is a species of crow. It is a name applied also to a cheat, or a swindler. Ha! now I have it! These crooks have moved to a new hiding-place, a new rookery, of which Lingerie is not informed. So the Big Finger thus sends her instructions for locating him."

"Go it, Felix! You're at the half!" cried Coleman, laughing. "In another quarter-hour you'll be coming down the stretch. By Jove! if Petticoats thus locates this Big Finger, it will be a cold day if we are left at the flag. Can you intepret any more of it?"

"Pass Woodcock!" muttered Boyd, still intently studying the advertisement. "I should infer, Jimmie, that the woman is instructed to pass some place named——"

"Hold up!" interrupted Coleman. "There is a saloon over on the East Side named the Woodcock. It is run by one Martin Leary. I know the place well."

"And the man?"

"I believe he is all right, and as square as a brick."

"Yet this may refer to his saloon. A rendezvous could be held outside without reflecting upon him. Pass Woodcock is what the notice says, and it plainly is what the woman is told to do. Let's go a step farther. 'Gig 10-11-12. Last drawing.'"

"Evidently the Big Finger has played policy," observed Coleman, when Boyd again read from the notice. "Do you know the name of that gig? It may have some significance."

"I do not, nor do I think the numbers refer to a policy gig, although another blind evidently has been attempted," replied Boyd. "It is even less obscure, however."

"You don't mean that you have fathomed it?"

"I think so, Jimmie," nodded Boyd. "This is the eleventh day of the tenth month. Very frequently we see dates expressed in numbers. The number twelve must refer to the hour of the day. There are two twelves in the twenty-four hours, and also two policy drawings each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Mr. Big Finger states last drawing, which evidently signifies afternoon, or P. M. Plainly enough, Jimmie, he instructs some woman, for whom this notice is intended, to pass the Woodcock at twelve o'clock this very night."

"Good again!" exclaimed Coleman. "I'll wager you're right. What comes next?"

"Take one in black, and drop one in brown," replied Boyd, reading from the advertisement. "Hump! that's not even blind."

"What do you make of it?"

"It is fifty to one, Jimmie, that the woman will sight two men soon after passing the Woodcock, one in black and one in brown. She is instructed to drop the one in brown, and follow the one in black. And, mark me, Jimmie, he will conduct her to the author of this now quite lucid communication."

A rather ominous composure had settled upon Felix Boyd, but the enthusiasm of the central office man was very manifest.

"Lucid, indeed!" he cried, with genuine admiration. "Yet, I'll wager that you are the only man on earth who could have read so quickly between the lines. You have remarkable discernment, Felix, and——"

"Pshaw!" interrupted Boyd, with startling austerity. "It is not at all blind. A schoolboy could interpret it. The longer I study it, the more confident I am that—faugh! it is too plain. These knaves must have taken me for an ass. They have made this so plain that they have overshot their mark. Terry, see if it appears in the other papers."

"Yes, sir, it does. It is in all of the leaders."

"Of course it is!" sneered Boyd derisively. "In making sure that I should see it, these scoundrels have exposed their own game. That notice, Jimmie, was meant for me alone."

"For you?" cried Coleman amazedly.

"I have no doubt of it. If intended for a confederate only, as I first thought, some plan certainly would have existed by which to confine the notice to a single paper. Criminals do not publish themselves broadcast, save with some secret design. I began to suspect their game as soon as I discovered how superficial their decoy advertisement really is, Jimmie. It is meant for me alone."

"But with what design?"

"To lure me into their hands," cried Boyd. "The knaves have reasoned that I should see this notice, that I

would suspect them of some new knavery, and hasten to investigate it by shadowing their woman. Their game is to have her lead me into their clutches."

"By Jove! that throws a different light upon the affair," said Coleman gravely. "I was hoping to run down this whole gang in a bunch, with a squad of men from headquarters."

"Impossible!" Boyd at once declared. "Though he has overreached himself by being a bit too crafty in framing up this decoy notice, the author of it is far from being a blockhead. He designed that I should interpret it, and, knowing the danger that might result, he will anticipate any general move against him, and will be guarded at every point. Failure only would follow anything of that kind. Whatever I do, Jimmie, must be done alone."

"Not by a long chalk!" cried Coleman decisively. "You are not going up against this gang alone. It would be taking your life in your hand, and I'll not stand for it. If there's to be a ragged night of it, I'm going to be at your elbow through thick and thin."

But Felix Boyd gravely shook his head.

"Thanks for your offer, Jimmie, which is like you," said he; "but this affair, if I have sized it up correctly, shows me but one effective course. I am determined to land these scoundrels sooner or later, and this opportunity to get a definite line on them, and have a look at their chief, is one I will not lose, let the danger be what it may."

"But we two can shadow the woman as well as you alone."

"Two on her track will be one too many, Jimmie," Boyd firmly insisted. "The vigilance of these knaves will be redoubled to-night, and I will hazard nothing that might pervert their designs. I am going straight into the net they have spread for me."

"But how can I help you?"

"In one way at least," replied Boyd. "They will foresee that I may anticipate personal peril, and very likely put a shadow on the companion of the man whom the woman is instructed to follow. I want you to look after that fellow, and see what you can make of him."

"While you shadow the woman?"

"Precisely."

"Why not arrest him after they separate, and so make sure of——"

"It will not do," interrupted Boyd. "I do not know how many spies they may have out to-night. As I said before, I will chance nothing so aggressive that they will back water. I am determined to get next to this gang, if the possibility exists."

"Perhaps you are right," said Coleman seriously. "Yet I don't like the outlook for you. These curs already have tried hard to turn your toes up. If you follow this woman alone, as like as not you'll get a knife thrust in the back, or a bullet from some unseen——"

"Hold—wait a bit!" Boyd abruptly cried, with a quick flash of his keen, gray eyes. "I think I see a way to head off anything of that kind. I have another idea."

"Well, let's hear it."

"The chief of these crooks must know that I have seen only one woman of his gang—the Dole girl—and in order to further assure me that I am on the trail he has opened for me, he may impose upon her this job of to-night, assuming that I will recognize her."

"That's quite probable," admitted Coleman.

"She is an erect, well-built girl, nearly as tall as I am," continued Boyd. "Very naturally, she will wear a veil, and possibly a cloak, or some long garment. Be that as it may, I shall be prepared. Is there a place near the Woodcock, a hotel, saloon, or any available cover, where we can slip into a private room for a few moments?"

"Just the place," replied Coleman. "There is Macy's hotel, an inferior dive, four or five doors above."

"On the same side?"

"Yes."

"Is there an entrance directly off the sidewalk?"

"Yes, a ladies' entrance, into a corridor, and up a flight of stairs."

"Good enough! I think I see a way of suppressing the girl, and taking her place."

At noon that day Felix Boyd left his Pine Street office, and did not return.

Just before departing, he entered the side room, in which he kept his wardrobe and materials for preparing a disguise, and from a safe in one corner he took a small steel box and an elastic strap, the latter having a small bag or pocket attached. After removing his coat and vest, he adjusted the strap over his shoulder and around his body, in such a way that it brought the pocket directly in the hollow of his left arm.

"What's the harness for, Mr. Boyd?" inquired Terry, who was curiously watching him.

"Harness, eh?"

"Yes, sir. Sure, it looks like a harness."

"Well, Terry, it enables me to safely carry a small but decidedly dangerous object under my arm, where there is very little pressure, and no liability of a violent blow," Boyd complacently explained. "Yet I can reach and remove the object very easily, and one searching me for weapons would never think of feeling beneath my arm. Here is the article, Terry. I keep it locked in the safe, and think you never have seen it."

While speaking, he had unscrewed the cover of the steel box. It contained, carefully packed in cotton, a circular object of clear glass, rather more than two inches in diameter, and an inch thick in the middle.

"Terry," said he, as he carefully placed it in the pocket under his arm, and then put on his coat and vest; "if, Terry, I was to hurl it at yonder closed door, though the latter were thrice as heavy, there would be no door left there worth speaking of. I believe I remarked to Coleman that Mr. Big Finger would find me loaded for bear."

The lad looked a bit awed.

"What is it, Mr. Boyd?" he ventured to inquire. "A bomb?"

"Rather, my boy! That glass contains nitroglycerin!"

II.

That Felix Boyd was right, that the curious advertisement was a decoy designed only for him, and that its author now was resolved to destroy this man who re-

peatedly had foiled his knavish designs; all became very obvious when Boyd finally succeeded in reaching that under-world of criminals and crime of which he had spoken, and of which a glimpse may be taken just in advance of his arrival.

The scene upon which he presently intruded was a large, square chamber, the approach to which was through a labyrinth of outer alleys and dark, interior corridors, impenetrable without a guide, and so devious as to leave one in doubt whether the chamber to which they led was above or below the earth's surface, of which the place itself presented no reliable evidence.

Heavy beams and girders crossed the ceiling and walls, suggesting a solidarity like that of a fortress. A broad oak door in one of the walls was thickly studded with huge rivets, while an iron lever at one side operated a combination of heavy bolts and bars with which the door was secured. The place was as silent and confined as a tomb, and nearly as gloomy.

What little light there was came from a hooded lamp on a table near the wall, and a few feet from the closed door. While most of the room was left in obscurity, one bright circle of light fell upon some papers spread open on the table, and was reflected upward to the face of a man intently studying the written sheets.

It was a hard, stern face, that of a man over fifty, smoothly shaven, and with every line and feature denoting a powerful intellect and an invincible will. Yet the face was as brutal in its sinister austerity as that of a bulldog, and the man's huge head and broad shoulders could belong only to one of imposing frame and unusual physical prowess.

Presently he looked up, like one slightly startled by some distant sound, and his piercing eyes, with a glint and glitter as cold as those of a serpent, were turned swiftly toward the closed door, upon which his gaze lingered intently for several moments, while he listened with strained ears.

Then he spoke a single word, sharply, yet not above an ordinary tone; but the voice of the man was as hard as his countenance, and with a ring as ominously cold and threatening as that of steel meeting steel

"Busby!" he cried.

Instantly a man appeared beside the table, almost as if he had been summoned through the floor, while, in fact, he had quickly emerged from an obscure passageway masked in the wall at the right of the table.

"Who is with Griggs at the entrance of the C— Street house?"

The question came curt and sharp the instant the man appeared, as from one who ruled his confederates with an iron will.

"Splain is with him," Busby quickly answered.

"Does he know what to do if——"

"If need be—yes! Both know, and will do it."

"The court alley—who watches there?"

"Varney and Phil Kane."

"And the way through the tannery yard?"

"Gibson."

"So—what's the hour?"

"Half-past twelve."

"It is time—quite time! There should be a report from some of our spies. Two near the Woodcock, one at the precinct police station, two near the central office—Busby, is the way open through the brewery cellar and to the river, in case of a sudden raid?"

"Yes, precisely as you directed. Your every command has been executed. Surely a warning would have reached us by this time, if there were any signs of a raid from the central office or the precinct station."

"Signs—faugh!" cried the chief, with a virulent sneer. "There may be none. This Boyd is shifty—infernally shifty. No man can tell what move he may make. He left his office at noon, but for what? Kelly lost him in the Astor House at two, a significant fact. Plainly, he aimed to escape a shadow, for Kelly is not easily evaded. Shifty—always shifty! Yet I believe he will proceed alone against us to-night, with a view to obtaining more information."

"Suppose he has not seen your advertisement."

"Bah! He has seen it. I have learned of what the duties of his office consist. His evasion of Kelly also goes to prove that he has seen it. I am convinced of that."

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"Yet he may not have interpreted it correctly."

"Faugh! Let him alone for that. He has shown us only too plainly that he can see through a ladder. I made it clear enough for him. He will suspect us of planning another job, and I am banking on the probability that he will shadow Jessie Dole, and attempt to enter after her."

"In which case?"

"I have men concealed at every point, in both alleys, in the side court, in the vestibule of the house. He will find it easy—easy indeed—to be seized, throttled to silence, and brought here bodily. Let him but enter the net I have spread, and he is ours."

Busby smiled faintly at the malevolent curtness of the speaker, whose every word left his lips with a snap like that of a whip.

"Yet he may not come here alone," said he. "What then?"

"If not alone, he will not come at all. Jessie is to follow Ranney, who awaits her with Sanders near the Woodcock. Kelly also is now on watch there, and if our quarry has a companion, or if any central office sleuth is on his track to learn where he goes, Kelly will not fail to discover it, and will at once warn Ranney and the girl. At the first sign of danger, the game is off, and all hands disperse."

"Suppose he sets Coleman after Sanders?"

"Then Sanders has only to give him the slip and go home," snapped the chief. "Why do you question me thus, Busby? Am I a fool? Do you think I have failed to head off every move that can imperil us?"

"No, no, chief! Yet——"

"Faugh! that is not like me. Either we shall nail our man, Busby, and accomplish it safely, or the whole game is off, and we shall have it to try again. I have left no way open for this man Boyd to best or fool us, shiftily though he is. We shall safely land him, or—— Ha! the buzzer! See who is there!"

The noise of an electric signal had interrupted this chief of crooks, and Busby hastened to a tube in the wall near the door, and for a moment listened intently.

"Who is it? And what?" cried the chief, impatiently.

"Kelly at the street door."

"Order him here at once. A lamp—that in the bracket. Kelly here first—that ought to be a good sign. Plainly, there was no need for warning Ranney and the girl. Either that is right, or the whole business is ditched by some unexpected—— The door, Busby! There's his signal at the door."

These mingled commands and comments followed fast upon one another, yet this energetic chief of crooks, despite his curt vehemence and a constant display of intense mental activity, did not once rise from his seat at the table. Nevertheless, his restless eyes seemed alive to every shadow in the dim chamber, and his ears alert for the slightest sound.

In obedience to his commands, Busby quickly lighted a bracket lamp on one of the walls, the rays from which accentuated the ominous grimness of the place; and then he hastened to throw the bolts which secured the heavy door.

As it swung open, there was revealed only a small portion of an adjoining corridor, where not a ray of light relieved the intense darkness beyond. Yet, out of this gloom there darted a lithe, slender young Irishman, whose thin face and crafty eyes wore the indubitable stamp of the criminal, and whose flushed cheeks and strained breathing told of exceeding haste.

"Well, Kelly?" cried the chief, the instant the man appeared. "What news?"

"The game is on, chief," Kelly hurriedly answered. "Ranney is on his way here, with Jess Dole following in his wake. Sanders has bolted, and if my peepers served me right, he was followed by that central office sleuth, Jimmie Coleman. Billy will give him the slip, however, so little good will Coleman get from——"

"But, Boyd—what of Boyd?" the chief forcibly interrupted. "Haven't you seen Boyd?"

"Not a sign of him, chief, and that's what sent me here on the run," answered Kelly. "Not seeing him, I hardly knew what to do. If I had warned Ranney and the girl, I stood in a way to queer the whole game. When I saw

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Coleman, or a man I took to be him, it led me to think that Boyd was piping the game from some point. Yet not hide nor hair of him could I discover, or any one like him. So I bolted here to ask what I——"

"Stop! Answer me quickly!" cried the chief, with suppressed intensity. "At what time did the girl pass Leary's?"

"At five minutes past twelve."

"I told her twelve—precisely twelve! Why the devil was she late? Are you sure? Was it after twelve?"

"Five minutes, chief, good and strong."

"Perdition upon her! Had you seen her before she passed the Woodcock?"

"Not a sign of her."

"Or of Coleman?"

"Nor of him."

"Where were Ranney and Sanders?"

"Waiting on the corner below Leary's until the girl should show up," Kelly hurriedly explained. "When she came in sight, Sanders bolted across the street, and then I saw Coleman cross a bit above and follow him. Billy was wise to it, too, so I'm sure I was right. Ranney at once started for here, and the girl followed him some twenty yards behind."

"Could you discover no one on their track?"

"I'll swear there was no one," cried Kelly, decisively. "The whole street was deserted. That was what queered me, chief, so I made a short cut for here, thinking that Boyd possibly had taken no hand in the job, but had turned it over to Coleman. If——"

"Faugh! that's absurd!" interrupted the chief, with a fierce snarl of perplexity. "If you were right in that, Coleman would have shadowed the girl, not bolted after Sanders. Boyd certainly is at work on some infernal line, and our precautions must be redoubled. Busby!"

"Here, sir!"

"Is the front house in darkness, and the corridors leading here?"

"Every one, sir, as dark as a pocket."

"With a watch at the front windows?"

"Two, sir. Gibson and Tony Briggs."

"Is Belcher yonder?" demanded the chief, pointing to

the passage from which Busby had entered a short time before.

"Sure, sir."

"Send him out at once with a notice to the gang in the court and alleys, that if a raid is—— Hold! there's the signal again! Answer it!"

Again Busby darted to the tube in the wall.

"Ranney has just arrived at the house," he presently reported. "Now the girl is there, also. Briggs reports that there is no sign of Boyd, however. He has Gibson watching in the dark from the front window. The street is deserted, he says. Ranney and Jessie Dole are waiting in the back hall until you——"

"Stop! Order both here at once!" the chief sharply interrupted. "There is something amiss, or—— Kelly!"

"Here, sir!"

"Send Belcher out to the court and alleys, to warn the men there to report the slightest sign of a raid. If Boyd has got a line on us in any way, he may attempt a raid an hour hence, thinking us unprepared."

"That's right, too!" cried Kelly, as he disappeared in the passage.

"Busby!"

"Right here, sir!"

"After Ranney and that girl arrive, despatch a man through the brewery cellar, to make doubly sure that way of escape is clear, and have him order Payson to have the launch ready to get under way at a moment's notice. We may have to bolt from here on the run, unless we can locate that man Boyd and learn what he's about."

"I'm blessed if it doesn't look so."

"The devil take him, I say! One never can tell where to find him. If I once get him in my clutches—— Ha! the door, Busby! Open the door for Ranney and the girl."

The man hastened to obey, and at the same moment Kelly reappeared from the passage.

As Busby threw open the heavy door, a tall, dark man, in black, strode quickly into the chamber and approached the table.

"What's gone wrong, chief?" he impulsively cried.

"I've done my part, but I have seen no sign of Felix Boyd."

"Nor has Kelly," was the sharp rejoinder. "Either you've all gone blind, or there's something amiss. Where's the girl? Where is Jessie Dole?"

"Picking her way through that infernal corridor!" cried Ranney. "It's as dark as a nigger's boot. She followed me all right from the Woodcock, and joined me just as I came into the house. Why so much darkness? There is not a lamp from the street door to this place, and one might knock his brains out unless familiar with the way."

"It is dark because I ordered it dark," cried the chief, with threatening austerity. "Is that girl on the way here? Why was she five minutes late at the Woodcock? Busby, go and hurry up that girl! If she has not seen Boyd——"

"She has seen him, gentlemen, and now the same privilege is yours! Come, come, fall back, every man of you! If you come too near me there'll be trouble right on the jump!

The interruption came from Felix Boyd himself.

III.

Observing that Busby was about to enter the dark corridor after the girl supposed to have been following Ranney, Felix Boyd had moved quickly into the lighted chamber while speaking, brushed forcibly by the two startled men who stood in his way, then sprang quickly across the room to the opposite wall, against which he placed his back to preclude any assault from behind.

He presented a startling picture for a moment, with his tall, lithe figure drawn up, his head thrown back, his hands warningly raised, and with his firm face and dilated eyes evincing a coolness and courage that briefly awed his observers, quite as much as his unexpected appearance had startled them.

For the moment not a man among them could find his voice, and Boyd quickly added, in tones that rang with

an odd mingling of severity and scorn through the silent room:

"Come, come, you fellows, are you struck dumb? A chilly greeting, indeed, to give an invited guest! Who among you enjoys the unenviable distinction of being called—the Big Finger? It is chiefly to have a look at Mr. Big Finger that I am here, and upon his own indirect invitation. You, sir, at the table—are you the great mogul of this gang of blacklegs? If so, I am glad to meet you—and that's no lie!"

This ironical harangue gave the gang time to pull themselves together, and when it became evident that Boyd contemplated no immediate violence, although prepared for any on their part, they fell back some paces, with features betraying a reviving assurance that he was alone and in their power.

Before any of his subordinates could speak, however, the chief at the table, with his sinister eyes never leaving Boyd's taunting face, thrust out his arm in Busby's direction, and sternly cried:

"The door! Busby—the door!"

The man addressed understood him, and the door closed with a bang, and the clanging bolts shot into their sockets. Yet Felix Boyd appeared to have no interest in thus cutting off his escape.

"Busby, eh?" he cried, with ringing curtness. "I thought as much. Your villainous countenance, Busby, appeared rather familiar. Glad to learn that my memory played me no trick."

"Much good the recognition will do you," sneered Busby, with a scowl.

"Aye, much good, indeed!" supplemented the chief, with a gesture imposing silence upon the several ruffians gathered near him. "Surely, Felix Boyd, you do not expect to leave this place alive."

"Alive? Why, certainly," cried Boyd curtly. "When I respond to such a pressing invitation as yours, Mr. Big Finger—if you'll pardon my ignorance of your proper name—I expect to be treated graciously."

"So you came well armed, no doubt, and are prepared to defend yourself?" queried the chief, with sinister significance.

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"Armed, eh? Yes, I have a brace of guns. Here they are, and good ones. You may find them useful before I go. I will shew them your way, that you may feel perfectly safe while I remain here."

And while he spoke Boyd drew a revolver from each hip pocket, placed both upon the floor, and then kicked them, one after the other, across the room toward his amazed observers. This move was but a clever trick on his part, however, to render more impressive his subsequent conduct, and awe these ruffians into a belief that he meant all that he threatened.

Two of the gang quickly seized the weapons, but the chief, with a muttered command, checked their momentary display of aggressiveness against this man they now believed to be unarmed. Then he stared again at Boyd, and rejoined, with a rather sardonic smile:

"Either your nerve is great, or you abuse yourself with a mistaken idea of our intentions. What do you mean by coming here at my invitation?"

"Precisely what I say," Boyd curtly answered. "You spread a net for me, and I walked into it. Did you imagine that I should shrink from it? You have yet to learn that such men as I do not fear such men as you."

The lips of the other took on a cruel curl, and he answered, with a sneer:

"Evidently you read deeper than I suspected."

"Yes, quite likely."

"Why, then, did you not attempt to effect our arrest?"

"Because I foresaw that you would be well guarded against that, and I since have seen striking evidence of it. A raid would have been a failure."

"Ah, you are complimentary in a way," observed the chief, with a leer.

"I can appreciate genius even in a criminal," retorted Boyd, with dry contempt.

"And I in a minion of the law," sneered the chief. "Possibly we are more equally endowed with genius than you would be willing to admit."

"That I deemed it necessary to pay you this visit, in order to get a look at your rascally countenance, is itself an admission of your genius for crime and cunning," returned Boyd dryly.

From the beginning of this strange interview, their relative positions had not changed. Boyd remained standing at the wall, with his arms folded across his breast, with his right hand thrust well within his vest, and resting lightly on the destructive missile he had secreted there; while his forceful face, pale though it appeared, wore constantly an expression of mingled severity and contempt.

The fact of Boyd's presence there had spread to others of the gang. From the masked passage in the corner they came silently slinking into the chamber, grouping themselves near the table, until Boyd counted no less than nine, and staring darkly at this intruder whose means of getting there was still a mystery to nearly all. That the chief himself was not quite clear upon this was evinced by his next question.

"How did you succeed in entering this place?" he demanded, in reply to Boyd's last remark.

"If you were indeed my equal, that question would be needless," said Boyd curtly. "I held up your Dole girl before she reached the Woodcock, and ran her into Macy's hotel. You will find her there in the custody of Detective Akerman, of the central office, if you care to seek her."

The chief started slightly, and his threatening frown deepened.

"Ha! I understand!" he muttered, with ominous voice. "It was you who followed Ranney?"

"Yes. And in yonder dark corridor," added Boyd, "you will find an auburn wig, a woman's skirt, hat and veil, and an outer garment of which I relieved your decoy. All of which I lingered to remove before entering this room, lest they should impede my movements. Do I make myself plain?"

Growls of resentment came from several of the gang when the truth was thus disclosed, and the thin lips of their chief were drawn until they displayed his gleaming white teeth, like a dog about to bite. Yet, he still held the gang in check, much as if he wished to learn Boyd's true mission there, or as if he derived a certain grim satisfaction from this talk with the man who repeatedly had thwarted their criminal designs.

"Perfectly plain," he answered, with a semi-subdued snarl. "You are even more clever than I thought. I learned from Broger, before you sent him up the river, that he had referred to me in your hearing as the Big Finger. I thought you readily would recall it, and I made it the basis of this move to get you in my clutches. Yes, you are more clever than I thought. The darkness here has made your counter-move possible; but the misfortune now is yours, not ours, for you shall leave this place only upon a stretcher."

"On the contrary, I shall walk out by the way I entered, and without opposition," Boyd curtly answered, as if piqued by the other's malevolent voice and aspect.

Then, before a reply could be made, he added, in tones that rang even more sharply through the room, and brought darker frowns to the face of every hearer:

"A truce to such threats, you fellows! I came here only to secure a mental photograph of every man of you, from the Big Finger down to the little. Nine in all, eh? A full complement calls for ten. If there are more of you, bring them on; for I would like a look at all of your rascally gang. And now, you at the table, having told you my mission here, suppose you state your business with me. Doubtless you had some motive in luring me to your villainous den. So state it briefly—and then I'll go my way."

The chief of the crooks, for a mention of whose name Boyd vainly had listened, drew his chair nearer the table, across which he rested his brawny arms, and glared in momentary silence at the taunting face and motionless figure of this man who thus coolly scorned and defied him.

"My business with you is more serious than you seem to imagine," he presently answered, with a voice now plainly expressing his intense bitterness and hatred. "You are too dangerous a man to let go. Now, hark you, Mr. Felix Boyd!"

"Well, I am listening."

"I will tell you why I lured you here," the chief went on, with suppressed ferocity. "For months you have been a stumbling-block in my way. Again and again you have, with your infernal craft and cunning, caused the mis-

carriage of designs which I had matured after weeks of labor and much expense. But for you—you alone! we should successfully have executed our many projects, and derived therefrom a profit worthy the toil and the perils we embraced."

"Glad to learn that my efforts have proved so effective," said Boyd curtly.

"More even than that," continued the other, ignoring the taunting remark. "Through you, one of our number has been killed. Through you, two are doing time in Sing Sing. Through you——"

"Through me you all shall finally land there!" interrupted Boyd sharply. "Take my word for that."

"You ask my business with you," cried the chief, with terrible sternness. "I have not lured you here to bribe you, not to warn you, nor to listen longer to your taunting observations."

"For what, then? Come, be brief!"

"You are in our way!" thundered the chief. "I have lured you here to remove you, to sweep you from our path as one who already has stung us too deeply. The door, Busby! Your guns, lads! Some of you seize him, and——"

"Stop!"

Like a flash Boyd's hand came from within his vest, and was raised high above his head. He held in his palm the appalling missile he had brought, upon the glass face of which the rays of light gleamed and glistened with startling brilliancy, and at the sight of which the several ruffians who had sprung toward him instinctively fell back.

"Hold your horses for a moment, you fellows!" Boyd quickly added, still poising the gleaming object above his head. "I am not the dupe, nor to be victim, of such as you. Fall back, every man of you, for I hold your lives in my hand. This object at which you stare is made of glass, and contains an explosive sufficient to send you all to kingdom come and wreck the roof above us. Were I to drop it to the floor, not a man among us would live to tell the tale of this night's work. Were you to shoot me where I stand you dogs, my last act would be to drop it.

—so have a care! If upon death you are resolved—we will meet it together!”

Pen could not describe the way in which this was said, nor the entire effect upon the men who heard it and beheld the speaker's stern, white face. That he meant what he said, not a man among them could doubt; and to a man they instinctively shrank from his uplifted hand.

By slow degrees the color had left the face of the chief crook among them. He already felt his victim slipping from his hands. He was shrewd enough to plainly see the chance Boyd was taking, and that, if he had spoken the truth, he held, indeed, the ribbons of the situation. Knowing Boyd as he did, this crook could not doubt that he meant all he said; yet he hoarsely demanded, stretching half across the table:

“Do you mean that? Do you mean that, you devil?”

Boyd was very pale, yet the look on his face was one to have awed any beholder. He ignored the question asked. With the missile still held high above his head, with his gaze covering his every observer, he cried, sternly:

“The door, Busby! Throw open that door!”

“Don't do it, Busby!” thundered the chief. “Not on your life!”

With his left hand, Felix Boyd drew out his watch.

“You shall have ten seconds, Busby, in which to open that door!” he cried, coolly. “I will count them for you. If I count to ten, and that door still is closed, as surely as God hears me, we go to kingdom come together. One——”

He began to count. His voice fell with the ring of a death-knell on the otherwise silent chamber. One by one the gang shrank farther away, yet appeared so held by the thrilling scene and by Boyd's awe-inspiring face, that not one among them left the room.

“Six! Seven!”

Busby laid his hand on the lever.

“Eight!”

An oath of dismay broke from one of the gang.

“Nine!”

“Stop!”

The last came from the chief. With face as ghastly

white as the linen of his throat, with his every feature convulsed and distorted, with his gaze riveted on Boyd's hueless countenance, he stretched out his arm toward the door, and hoarsely cried:

"Open it, Busby!"

A breath of relief broke from every man. Busby drew back the clanging lever, and threw open the corridor door.

"Now, fall back, Busby!" Boyd sharply cried. "Not a move from any man among you, or, God hearing me, I will execute my threat. You, sir, at the table—bear this in mind. I now am going my way, leaving you to go yours; but yours yet shall land you behind prison bars. Some day I shall return your courtesy of to-night, by placing manacles on your wrists. Fall back, Busby, still farther!"

Busby shrank step by step along the side wall, and left open the way to the gloomy corridor. With the missile still poised above his head, Felix Boyd strode across the chamber, backed quickly toward the open door, and then suddenly vanished into the darkness beyond.

"The door, Busby!" roared the chief, with an outburst of fearful passion. "Close the door! Signal the gang in front to head him off! We'll land him yet! We have him in the corridor—like a rat in a trap! Some of you to the front street! Others to the side court! They're his only avenues of escape! Away with you! Drop him with a bullet—drop him on sight!"

Boyd had anticipated no less than these endeavors on the part of the gang, and had carefully fixed in his mind the way by which he had entered under Ranney's guidance, that he might lose no time in returning.

The moment the door of the chamber closed behind him, showing that the opportunity to drop him with a bullet as he fled had been overlooked, he struck a match and quickly made his way through the dismal passage, which appeared to adjoin the foundation wall of the front building he first had entered.

Before he had covered thirty yards, he heard the ringing of a bell, Busby's signal to the front house mentioned. and the sound guided him. In a moment, he reached a flight of stairs he previously had descended, up which he

hurriedly climbed, and then threw open a door leading into a kitchen adjoining the hall of the house.

There now was a light in the room, and at a tube in the wall a man stood listening, with his amazed countenance revealing plainly enough the nature of the startling facts which Busby hurriedly was imparting to him. Yet, the instant he beheld Boyd, his face changed like a flash, and he sprang back and reached for his hip pocket.

Boyd was after him with a leap like that of a tiger, however, and before the weapon could be drawn he landed a straight shoulder blow on the ruffian's neck, which sent him headlong into a corner.

"Just to remember me by!" cried Boyd, as he dashed across the room and into the hall.

After the important discoveries he so boldly had made, he fully realized that any one of the gang would promptly shoot him if the opportunity presented, and the situation still was too desperate to admit of his attempting to arrest the fellow he had floored.

Leaving arrests for subsequent consideration, therefore, he dashed through the hall of the house, quickly opened the front door, and then sped safely across the city street before the first of the gang from the secret chamber could put in an appearance.

"The raid came half-an-hour later, Jimmie," he explained to Coleman, next morning, as the two sat discussing the affair in Boyd's office. "I got there with a squad of officers from the precinct station as quickly as possible, but the birds had flown."

"Yes, very likely," laughed Coleman.

"Yet the outcome of the case fulfils most of my anticipations, Jimmie," Boyd quickly added. "I now have seen this master criminal, and most of his gang, and the way to landing him is clearer than it was."

"Surely!"

"Besides that, Jimmie, though we still have no good case against them, we have broken up their headquarters for a time, and many a day may pass before they get in shape to attempt another job of any importance."

"Let us hope so."

"So I do, Jimmie. Yet when it comes—I shall be ready for them!"

The Case of the Banker's Double.

I.

In response to the bell of the telephone on his desk, Mr. Felix Boyd raised the receiver to his ear, then called sharply:

"Hello!"

In reply he received over the wire, in accents of terrible haste and alarm:

"Boyd—robbery—haste! I'm Smith, of—— God, you'll kill me! You——"

Then came the startling noise of a heavy blow, as if the speaker had been violently struck; and then that peculiar click heard when a distant receiver is suddenly dropped, instead of hung in its socket, a sound readily recognized by an accustomed ear. Then rather more faintly, yet plainly audible to the listening man, came the sound of a fallen body, as that of a man stricken senseless, or lifeless, to a floor.

The significance of all this was alarming. For the fraction of a second, Boyd listened intently, then sharply cried:

"Hello! hello!"

No answer.

"What's amiss, Felix?" demanded Jimmie Coleman, who then was seated near-by and had observed Boyd's changing countenance. "Anything wrong?"

"There's the devil to pay, I guess," Boyd quickly answered, while he hastened to ring up the central office of the telephone exchange.

From the clerk there he hurriedly endeavored to ascertain who had communicated with him. The attempt proved vain. The clerk could report only that Boyd's number had been called for through some instrument the number and location of which were unknown, and that

the desired connection had been made by means of the central office switchboard.

Once again Boyd listened briefly at the receiver, but silence only rewarded his effort. In so far as he could judge, the beginning and end of what appeared like a dreadful crime, if not an appalling tragedy, had been suggested in those few short seconds, those wild words over the wire, followed by a sickening blow and a heavy fall.

"The devil take it!" he exclaimed impatiently, as he hung up the receiver. "This is what I call having one's hands tied."

"What was it?" queried Coleman amazedly.

Boyd quickly told him what had been said, and described what he also had heard.

"It looks very much as if there was something wrong somewhere—but where?" he impatiently added.

"The call most likely came from one of your own clients," suggested Coleman quickly. "No other person threatened in the way suggested would have appealed directly to you."

"That's true enough, but I have over fifty patrons," cried Boyd. "I cannot rush to all fifty offices at once, and an attempt to visit them successfully would require half-a-day. In that time any sort of a crime could be committed, and the criminals easily make their escape."

"Don't you recall the name of Smith among your clients, or isn't he one of them?"

"No, no, and that's the trouble. The man who telephoned cried only that he was Smith, of——, and there he plainly was interrupted by a violent blow. Evidently he was about to add the name of the firm by which he is employed, which would have told me just where to hasten."

"I see," nodded Coleman. "I see."

"But I know of no clerk named Smith employed by any of my clients," Boyd hurriedly added. "That's the devil of it. For I feel certain that Smith was in some mighty desperate corner when he attempted to telephone to me for help."

"Indeed, it looks so."

"Plainly his last words were addressed to an assailant;

whom he must have seen approaching even while he tried to telephone to me. Then came the blow I distinctly heard, and then the fall of a body. Yes, yes, Smith certainly was in some desperate situation. It's like being on nettles, this sitting here in ignorance whither to turn," Boyd nervously added. "A murder may have been committed. A robbery may at this moment be in progress. I tell you, Jimmie, my reputation is at stake. What the deuce am I to do?"

"Try the directory!" cried the central office man, jumping to his feet to get it. "We may find Smith's name there, and that of the firm by which he is employed."

"Smith!" cried Boyd, in accents of impatient derision. "Good heavens, Jimmie, there are a thousand Smiths in the New York directory. It would take an hour to examine the entire list, and then the search might prove futile."

"By Jove! that's true."

"There's but one thing to be done," Boyd decisively cried, reaching for a leather-bound book on his desk. "Here's a list of my patrons. I'll draw off half of it on paper, and start you on a round to the several offices to learn if anything is wrong. Meantime, I will take the balance of the list and do the same. That's all we can do."

"Stay!" exclaimed Coleman. "Your idea is all right, and I'm with you; but you can expedite matters if you will tear the pages from the book, instead of delaying to copy so long a list. That's the stuff. Now give me half of them, and I'll let no grass grow under my feet. You look after the others."

Boyd had acted upon the suggestion even while Coleman was making it, and, before the latter fairly had finished, the two men were hastening from Boyd's Pine Street office, each with some of the pages torn from the book, and both bent upon reaching the offices of the numerous business houses with the least possible delay. That the interrupted telephone call had come from one of them seemed most probable, save alone that the entire episode was only a practical joke, which seemed too remote to be seriously considered.

Boyd's employers, moreover, comprised many of the wealthiest firms in the great banking-district; and thither both men hastened, parting company as they approached Wall Street. As a matter of fact, the telephone call had come from the office of one of the firms noted in that portion of the list which Boyd had retained. Yet for half-an-hour he hastened from one office to another, pausing only to glance into most of them, and in none disclosing the occasion for his hurried visit and abrupt departure.

Not until nearly noon, when he had almost completed his round, and was beginning to think himself on a veritable wild-goose chase, did the incident occur which set him right.

He was about entering one of the smaller office buildings in Broad Street, when, just as he left the sidewalk, a young man came rushing through the lower corridor and down the vestibule steps, fairly into the arms of Felix Boyd.

"Oh, Mr. Boyd, is it you?" he cried, pale with excitement. "Thank God for that! I was just seeking an officer."

"An officer!" exclaimed Boyd quickly. "For what? And who are you?"

"I'm Joe Galvin, clerk for Hersey & Co. You know Hersey, sir. There's a dreadful thing happened in our office. I just found Ben Smith, Hersey's bookkeeper and confidential clerk, dead on the office floor. He——"

"Wait!" Boyd sharply interrupted. "Half-a-second."

He quickly turned back, intending to call a policeman in case he required aid, but fortunately discovered Coleman at that moment entering an opposite building some distance away. A single sharp whistle drew his attention in Boyd's direction, and the latter delayed only to signal him to follow, then dashed up the steps and rejoined the waiting clerk.

The firm mentioned, Hersey & Co., was an old and conservative banking and brokerage house, of excellent reputation and recognized stability, though then doing only a moderate business. The firm originally had comprised Hersey and his son-in-law; but the latter having died, Hersey alone had conducted the business for some

years, the daughter retaining her husband's interest. That the firm name appeared in the list of Boyd's clients, at length had led the latter to seek Hersey's office.

"Galvin your name?" he cried, as he rejoined the clerk. "When did you make this alarming discovery?"

"Only just now, sir," replied Galvin, as the two men hastened through the deep corridor, at the rear of which the banker's office was located. "I had been out on an errand for Mr. Hersey, and returned only to find Smith dead on the floor. At least, I supposed him dead. I at once rushed out to call an officer."

"When did you start out on the errand mentioned?"

"Nearly an hour ago."

"Was Hersey then in his office?" demanded Boyd, noting that the time stated was about that at which he had received the telephone call.

"Yes, sir," replied Galvin. "He was in his private office, with Mr. Smith."

"Is Hersey absent now?"

"Yes, sir. He was there——"

"Enough for the present. Here we are."

They had reached the office door, and Boyd quickly opened it and entered.

It opened into a square, commodious room, the main office, about half of which was given to an enclosure containing three desks and a large safe, together with the other appurtenances ordinarily seen in such an office. A counter mounted with a tall brass lattice divided the enclosure from the open portion of the office, which was furnished with a table, several leather-covered chairs, and a small desk near one of the walls.

At the right of the door by which Boyd had entered, and barely four feet distant, was a door leading into a smaller side room, which was Mr. Hersey's private office. The door stood wide open, revealing a roll-top desk, the cover of which was raised, though the room was deserted.

Directly opposite the corridor door was a telephone, attached to the wall, and having no closet or enclosure; while upon the floor nearly below it was stretched the body of a man of forty, or thereabouts, prone upon his back, with arms widely extended and face upturned, the

latter as void of color as that of a dead man, save one livid bruise extending across his brow and into his hair.

Boyd's sweeping glances quickly took in the details mentioned. Further indicating that his first deductions had been entirely correct, the telephone receiver still was hanging by its cord as when suddenly dropped, while upon the floor near the prostrate man lay a short but very effective leather bludgeon, commonly termed a sand-bag.

Surely, if such evidence was worthy of any consideration, Smith had been brutally assaulted while at the telephone, nor had the office been entered since the crime was committed, until the clerk named Galvin appeared upon the scene. Though Boyd had deferred his investigation of the circumstances hardly a minute, as he was about to begin it Coleman also entered the office.

"Ah!" he ejaculated. "You have located the trouble."

"Finally," said Boyd tersely. "Close the door, Jimmie."

Quickly crossing the room he dropped to his knee upon the floor, and felt of the hand and wrist of the prostrate man. The effect upon Boyd was decidedly unexpected. For a moment there was reflected in his forceful, clean-cut face a surprise almost beyond containing.

"Ah, thank Heaven, this man is not dead," he cried quickly. "He is badly done up, that is all. A drop of liquor will revive him. Hasten to the nearest saloon, Galvin, and bring a flask of brandy. Lose not a moment."

The clerk, with a look of relief mentally noted by Boyd, at once hurried from the office, and the latter rose to his feet.

"It appears dead open and shut, doesn't it?" demanded Coleman, who had been sizing up the case and making a hasty survey of the two rooms.

"Yes, plain enough," replied Boyd. "This man's name is Smith, the one who telephoned to me. Done up alone here by some miscreant, and the place probably robbed. A dastardly crime, to say the least, and a bold one."

"Where the deuce were the other clerks at the time?"

"Can't tell yet. We shall have to inquire."

"It seems as if some of them should have been here,

or have returned before now. It is nearly an hour since Smith called you over the wire."

"That's true, and he must have been lying here ever since," admitted Boyd. "We'll get at the particulars a little later."

While speaking, he glanced at the floor, then carelessly picked up a book on the table, and quietly turned it over. It was a large volume of Dun's references, quite as large as an ordinary ledger. Boyd merely glanced at both sides of it, however, and betrayed no interest in it sufficient for Coleman to observe.

"I'm blessed if I understand the absence of the other clerks," repeated the central office man, with a glance at the senseless figure on the floor. "Hersey also is away, and the——"

"Ah, here's Galvin with the brandy," interrupted Boyd, as the clerk reentered. "Give him a dose, my boy; only a few drops. And while you're about it, Galvin, answer my questions. Then we shall waste no time."

"Here, I'll look after putting Smith on his pins," cried Coleman, seizing the brandy-flask from Galvin's hand. "You give your attention to Mr. Boyd."

"Certainly," Galvin readily answered.

"Tell me what you know of this affair, Mr. Galvin," said Boyd quickly. "State anything that occurred here this morning likely to have a bearing upon it."

"Really, sir, nothing very extraordinary happened while I was here," Galvin frankly replied. "The entire affair must have occurred during my absence."

"How many clerks does Hersey employ?"

"Three, sir. Smith is the bookkeeper and cashier, and frequently acts as Mr. Hersey's confidential clerk. Besides him there are Frank Torrey and myself."

"Do you know where Torrey has gone?"

"Mr. Hersey sent him to Brooklyn more than an hour ago, sir, to get a bank-book which he keeps at his residence."

Boyd's brows knit a little closer over his searching, gray eyes.

"Sent him to Brooklyn an hour ago, eh?" said he. "He has had hardly time to return. Do you happen to know why Hersey wanted the bank-book?"

"I think so, sir. When he came in at nine o'clock this morning, he stated that he should remain only to examine his mail, as he had an important engagement. Some person whose name he did not mention was about completing a big financial deal, he explained, and that he had an opportunity to place some ready cash at an unusual advantage. Something over a hundred thousand dollars, I think he said."

"Ah, that probably is why he wanted his bank-book," observed Felix Boyd, a bit dryly. "Go on, Mr. Galvin. How long did Hersey remain here?"

"Until about ten o'clock. Then he took his coat and went out, saying he might be absent until noon. He returned in less than half-an-hour, however, and hastened directly into his private office, where he at once called for Mr. Smith. A little later, Smith came out here and——"

Galvin stopped abruptly, with a nervous glance over his shoulder. From the lips of the man prostrate on the floor a feeble groan suddenly had risen, and the muscles of his hands and jaws were twitching convulsively.

"Go on, you two!" cried Coleman, who had been listening while he labored over the stricken man. "Don't mind us. I'll presently have him on his feet."

"Continue," said Boyd. "What about Smith?"

"He came out of the private office after a few moments, saying that Mr. Hersey wished to raise a hundred and forty thousand dollars in cash as quickly as possible. I was at once sent out with a check for forty thousand, and some negotiable bonds for forty more. I thought the affair just a bit unusual, but Smith stated that Hersey was in a hurry, so I did not wait to ask questions, but rushed away on the errand. When I returned, Torrey was just entering from a similar mission, and had nearly sixty thousand in cash."

"That was about half-past ten, think you?" queried Boyd, with a curious squint of his attentive eyes.

"It was nearly eleven, sir, when we both returned," replied Galvin.

"Was Hersey still in his private office?"

"Yes, sir. I saw him at his desk, counting the money which Mr. Smith at once took in to him."

"Quite convincing," nodded Boyd. "Go on, Mr. Galvin."

"Immediately afterward," continued the clerk, "Torrey was sent to Brooklyn for the bank-book. Then Hersey sent me to Harlem to take a letter to his daughter, of whose private funds also he wished to avail himself. When I returned I found the office deserted by all except Smith, whom I thought to be dead, and I at once rushed out and met you. That is all that I can tell of the——"

"One moment," interrupted Boyd. "Did Hersey himself instruct you to go to Harlem, or did he send out word to you by Mr. Smith?"

"By the latter, sir. Mr. Hersey still was busy over the cash we had brought him."

"So that Hersey and Smith were left alone here when you and Torrey departed at eleven o'clock."

"Yes, sir," declared Galvin. "I am positive of that. I saw Mr. Hersey still at his desk when I went out, and Smith was then helping him——"

He was interrupted by an approaching step in the corridor. Then the door was quickly opened, and Hersey himself entered the office.

"Good God!" he involuntarily exclaimed, recoiling when his gaze fell upon the scene. "What has happened to Mr. Smith?"

"Surely you should know," cried Boyd bluntly. "You were the last to leave him here."

"Leave him here!" echoed Hersey loudly. "What do you mean by that, Mr. Boyd? I have not been near this office since ten o'clock!"

"Humph!" muttered Boyd, under his breath. "Precisely what I suspected!"

II.

Hersey was a man of nearly seventy, and of an ordinary type. He was of medium build, had a complexion common to men of his years, and wore a gray beard and mustache. Though always neatly trimmed, his silvery hair was worn quite long, and in a way was his one dis-

tinctive feature, save alone that he invariably dressed in a suit of black. He was a type of man easy to counterfeit, and nearly any expert actor could, with very little art, have made himself into quite a perfect likeness of Mr. Rufus Hersey.

The banker's consternation and amazement were too genuine to be doubted, even if Felix Boyd had not already guessed the truth, or a part of it. Yet before Hersey could repeat his assertion, Smith again groaned deeply and moaned, as if he had heard, and now made an effort to corroborate his employer:

"That's right—that's true! He hasn't been here."

"Ah, good enough!" exclaimed Coleman, who had not ceased working over the wounded man. "You're coming to time, are you? Good for you. You're worth half-a-dozen dead men, after all. Yet this was a deucedly nasty clip that some cur gave you. Lend a hand here, Felix, and we'll get him up."

Boyd hastened to comply, and together they raised the clerk from the floor and placed him in a chair. The stimulant given him was having a salutary effect, and he gradually was regaining consciousness, though he still appeared weak and dazed, and sat with his head wobbling from side to side much as if his neck were made of rubber.

"Still a bit groggy, eh?" Boyd cheerily cried, patting him compassionately on the shoulder. "Well, well; you'll presently be O. K. A nasty clip, indeed. Get him a glass of water, Calvin; that will revive him. I'll wait until you are quite yourself, Mr. Smith, before asking you to explain what occurred here. Lucky we arrived as soon as we did, eh?"

"Yes—yes," Smith huskily faltered. "Did—did the scoundrel escape?" he added, with his dilating eyes now turned anxiously about the office.

"Well, yes, I'm afraid he did," replied Boyd. "I guess you don't realize that an hour has passed since you telephoned to me, and were knocked out at the instrument. Ah, here's the water, Mr. Smith. Take a long drink of it, and you'll soon be on your pins."

"Yes, thanks. I already feel better."

"Meantime," added Boyd, "I will enlighten Mr. Hersey,

who appears very much in the dark over the occasion for such a scene."

"Decidedly so," declared the banker. "What does Smith mean by the escape of a scoundrel?"

"You said you had been absent since ten o'clock, I believe," observed Boyd, turning to face him.

"I did, and it's perfectly true."

"Yet your three clerks would have testified to the contrary half-an-hour after your departure," said Boyd, more gravely. "I fear, Mr. Hersey, that you have been made the victim of a very original bit of knavery, and one of the shrewdest and most daring crimes of the day."

"Good heavens, sir! What do you mean?" demanded Hersey, growing very pale.

Boyd disclosed the misfortune to him as considerably as possible.

"I think my suspicions will prove very nearly correct," said he. "Soon after your departure, Mr. Hersey, a man entered who resembled you so closely that your three clerks were completely deceived by the likeness. He at once went into your private office, where, with the help of Mr. Smith, who is entirely innocent of any misconduct, the scoundrel succeeded in securing by crafty misrepresentations a considerable part of your fortune. If the figures given me by Galvin are correct, the amount of your loss is about one hundred and forty thousand dollars."

The banker staggered, too astounded by the appalling information to go to pieces at once under the shock.

"Wha-a-at!" he almost shrieked. "Robbed of one hundred and forty thousand dollars! Robbed of—are you mad, that you stand here idle! The police—I must call the police!"

Boyd quickly sprang between him and the door.

"One moment, Mr. Hersey," he cried. "You must not notify the police."

"Not notify them—you are crazy! I shall certainly do so! Let me pass——"

"Not until I have had my say," Boyd firmly insisted. "Remember, Mr. Hersey, that you are one of my clients, some of whom evidently have more faith in me than you

have, since they have accepted my advice in emergencies quite as serious as this. Now, understand me, sir. Either I shall handle this affair entirely alone and in my own way, or I shall drop it at once and return to my office. Now, sir, you may call the police, if you wish."

Boyd had an ugly way of making such moves as this, and the effect upon the banker was precisely what he expected. Hersey fell back a step, pale and crestfallen, and rejoined brokenly:

"Pardon me, Boyd. Perhaps I am wrong. I'm so shocked I hardly know what I am saying."

"I can appreciate your feelings, I assure you."

"But have you any clue to the thief?"

"Not the slightest," Boyd emphatically declared. "Yet I shall be quite as likely to find a clue as any member of the New York police."

"You are right, quite right," Hersey hoarsely admitted, staggering to a chair. "I am in no condition to act wisely. I leave the case entirely to you, Mr. Boyd. But what's to be done—what's to be done?"

"The first thing to do," replied Boyd, "is to hear Smith's story of the extraordinary affair. How are you feeling now, Mr. Smith? Are you able to clearly recall all of the circumstances which led to the brutal assault which you have suffered?"

Jimmie Coleman wondered a little why Boyd thus laid stress upon Smith's mishap, which was as nothing when compared with that of his employer; but the central office man wondered vainly, for the subtleties of Felix Boyd were quite often beyond his discernment, which was by no means inferior for all that.

"Yes, I am quite myself again, barring an aching head," Smith now rejoined, pulling himself together. "I can tell you precisely what occurred. God help me, I fear that Mr. Hersey never can forgive me for my blindness."

"The facts!" said Boyd tersely. "First of all, let's get at the facts, that no time shall be wasted. Omit no details, Mr. Smith, however trivial they may appear to you."

"I will endeavor to be exact," said Smith, mopping with a wet handkerchief the dull-red bruise on his brow.

"You are right in saying the scoundrel resembled Mr. Hersey. I never saw such a likeness."

"State just what occurred," suggested Boyd. "We all know you thought the scamp to be Mr. Hersey. Confine yourself to what was said and done."

"He hastened into the private office, and called me," Smith now explained. "Mr. Hersey already had informed me that he might require a large amount of cash this morning, hence this rascal's instructions did not at first surprise me."

"Naturally not."

"I found him seated at Mr. Hersey's desk, still with his hat on, as if he intended going out again. When he spoke, moreover, his voice was so like that of my employer that I had not the slightest suspicion."

"What had he to say?"

"He first stated that he had perfected the deal mentioned to me this morning, and required a large amount of cash at once. He appeared in some haste, and told me to write a check for forty thousand dollars, which I did, and to which he signed the firm name."

"Ah, a forgery! Did you examine the signature, Mr. Smith?"

"I did not. No thought of distrusting it entered my head."

"Evidently the scoundrel had laid his plans very carefully, and knew just what he was about," observed Boyd. "What next?"

"He next told me to have Galvin take the check, together with bonds to the same amount, and go out and get cash for them."

A groan of despair broke from Hersey upon hearing these details, but Felix Boyd quickly signed for him not to interrupt.

"I did what he commanded," continued Smith, "and sent Galvin to the bank. I then was told to send Torrey to the deposit vaults for some stock certificates, amounting to nearly sixty thousand dollars at their market value, and of which the scoundrel appeared perfectly well informed."

"Further indicating that he was indeed your employer," remarked Boyd. "Really, only a very superior knave

could have informed himself so fully before undertaking this delicate job. I think I see how it was done. Go on, Mr. Smith."

"I obeyed his instructions, and Torrey brought the certificates here. I took them into the private office, where the rascal filled out and signed the transfer blanks, and Torrey then went out and got them cashed. Both he and Galvin returned at the same time."

"Each with the cash desired?"

"Yes, sir. It was chiefly in large bills. While waiting for the checks to return, I had resumed work at my desk out here, leaving the man seated in the inner office. Meantime, he wrote two letters, one to his wife, and one to his daughter. That is, sir, if——"

"I understand," put in Boyd. "Such would have been the relations had the fellow really been Hersey. What next?"

"He told me to send the clerks to deliver the letters; Torrey to Brooklyn, and Galvin up to Harlem, where Mr. Hersey's daughter resides. He explained that he wanted additional funds from his daughter, also a bank-book which his wife would deliver to Mr. Torrey."

"A ruse!" exclaimed Boyd, with a toss of his head. "Merely a part of his infernally clever scheme. The knave knew that he already had accumulated all the cash he could hope to get away with, and the letters were designed only to get the two clerks well out of the way, thus making detection less liable when he attempted to leave the office, and also reducing the number of his opposers in case of discovery. A bold and far-sighted rascal, indeed! What next, Mr. Smith?"

"I obeyed his instructions, and then offered to help him count and arrange the cash, which I had placed on his desk."

"Ah, yes! Galvin stated that you were so engaged when he and Torrey departed with the letters. Up to that time you had not a thought, of course, but that you were dealing with Mr. Hersey."

"Assuredly not! No idea of such a swindle had entered my head."

"Strange if it had," cried Boyd, quite heartily. "It was a scheme to have blinded any man. But what led

to the subsequent clash? I infer that you finally discovered that you were being deceived, or at least formed some suspicion of it."

"I did, and it occurred in this way," Smith hastened to explain. "The swindler had not once risen from the desk, over which he sat bowed most of the time, in which attitude his face was partly hidden by his soft felt hat, which was precisely like that worn by Mr. Hersey. In moving about him while I helped arrange the money, however, I accidentally knocked his hat awry with my arm. Then, for the first time, I suddenly discovered that the fellow did not look quite natural."

"Ah, I see!" exclaimed Boyd approvingly.

"Yet the idea that the man was not Mr. Hersey appeared utterly absurd," cried Smith; "and naturally my first impression was only very vague, or I certainly should have betrayed myself. As it was, I merely begged pardon for my awkwardness, and the swindler nodded and replaced his hat, and we continued counting the money."

"Which gave you a chance to furtively study him," cried Boyd, with a nod. "I see—I see!"

"Precisely, sir!" Smith eagerly exclaimed. "Yet for my life I could not make sure of the fellow. The likeness was perfect, and he appeared so utterly unconcerned, that I could not feel convinced one way or the other. As you must know, Mr. Boyd, all this occupied but a moment or two."

"Yes, of course."

"Then the unusual business engaging us occurred to me, and my misgivings increased. I felt impelled to throttle the man then and there, but the fear of making a dreadful mistake in thus assaulting my employer served to deter me. Then the desperate possibilities of the situation began to alarm and confuse me. I dared not question the man in a way betraying my suspicion, lest he should instantly resort to violence, and possibly overcome me and escape with the cash."

"Quite right," nodded Boyd. "You acted discreetly."

"I tried to keep cool and steady myself, yet my hands were trembling violently," Smith excitedly continued. "I feared each moment that the scoundrel, if such he was,

might turn and close with me. Nor did I dare go from the office after help, lest he should escape, or I myself prove to be in error."

"I see."

"But I obeyed the next impulse born of my alarming excitement. I had been instructed to summon you at once, Mr. Boyd, in case of any such emergency. The number of your telephone is on the card attached to ours. I resolved to ring you up, sir, or at least make the attempt, knowing that, even if I was in error and the man really Mr. Hersey, no great harm would be done."

"True, Mr. Smith," bowed Boyd. "I appreciate the uncertainties under which you were laboring."

"All this transpired within a minute," Smith went on. "After strapping a package of money which I had just counted, I left the desk and started for the telephone yonder. I tried to appear indifferent, but my knees were shaking and I was greatly excited. I reached the instrument without having heard any move in the private office, and quickly rang up the central station and called for your telephone number."

"And then the trouble began, I take it."

"Indeed, yes!" admitted Smith, with a groan. "The moment I heard you cry hello, I also heard the scoundrel dashing out of the private office. When I saw him I fully realized that my fears were warranted, for murder itself cried out in his every feature. He did not start for the door, but for me, drawing a weapon as he came. I yelled something into the telephone, yet I hardly knew what, for the ruffian reached me in an instant. I dropped the receiver and tried to grapple with him, but he dealt me the blow on the head which—which——"

"Look out—catch him, Jimmie!" shouted Boyd. "He's fainting!"

So, indeed, he was. The rehearsal of the episode in which he had played so unfortunate a part had proved too much for him, in his weakened condition, and with his eyes rolling upward in his skull he suddenly had pitched forward in his chair, and fell like a dead weight into Jimmie Coleman's arms.

Some brandy and water presently revived him again, however; whereupon Boyd kindly remarked, suppressing

with a glance the further inquiries to which Hersey would have subjected him:

"You need rest and quiet for a time, Mr. Smith, or a fever may follow your injury. The scoundrel gave you a brutal blow, indeed, and here is the weapon with which it was inflicted. Lucky it is a sand-bag, instead of a locust, or you'd not have lived to tell what happened here. The knave has made off with the cash, all right, and left only a mighty fine-spun thread behind him. You just sit quietly, Mr. Smith, while I ask Mr. Hersey a few questions, and I then will take you home in a carriage. You need rest for the balance of the day, or you may go entirely to pieces."

"I do feel a bit done up, for a fact," Smith faintly admitted.

From Hersey, whom he then proceeded to question, Boyd soon gathered the facts which enabled him to size up the case at its face value.

It appeared that Hersey recently had been approached by a Western mining operator, ostensibly, who brought him letters of introduction from Denver bankers, and who offered to borrow quite heavily of Hersey at a high rate of interest and on good securities. He wanted the funds in cash, he stated, and by very plausible representations he succeeded in leading the aged banker into the deal. He bore the very respectable name of Arkright, and Hersey had been at the Hoffman House that morning by appointment, to complete the arrangements for the loan.

"And while you were detained at the hotel, and out of your office since ten o'clock," said Felix Boyd, after getting all of the particulars, "the clever confederate of your Mr. Arkright has played his part of their little game. It is plain on the face of it, and undoubtedly is the work of a gang of exceedingly clever criminals, who long have been operating in this locality."

"By Jove! I guess that's right," muttered Coleman.

"Your habits have been carefully studied," continued Boyd; "and in telling Arkright on what securities you promptly could realize cash, you yourself very probably gave these swindlers the information enabling them to craftily impress and deceive your clerk."

"Alas, yes!" groaned Hersey, wringing his hands. I do remember that I mentioned them to Arkright only yesterday. But I had no doubt of his honesty. His letters of introduction——"

"Pshaw! Forgeries, every one of them."

"But his confederate's likeness to me seems utterly——"

"Faugh! that was but child's play for such clever criminals," cried Boyd impatiently. "You have been watched and studied until your every habit was known. Your physical characteristics, your gray hair and beard, your invariable suit of black—all combined to make you a man easily impersonated."

"Then you do not think the rascal really was my double?"

"No, no; never! One of these knaves very skilfully made himself up to resemble you, and while his confederate detained you at the Hoffman House for a couple of hours, the scamp came here and slipped quickly into your private office. Observe that the doors are quite near one another, making the move comparatively easy."

"That's right, too," nodded Coleman.

"Then the rascal did all his business through your chief clerk, Mr. Smith, thus keeping well out of sight of the other two," continued Boyd. "It's not strange that Mr. Smith was deceived, Hersey, for you really paved the way for it when you remarked upon the loan you hoped to place this morning, and then hastened out to arrange for it. These swindlers worked up each and every delicate point of their rascally game, and Smith did only what any man would have done under such circumstances. He is in no way culpable."

"I do not say that he is, Mr. Boyd."

"I heard his call for help, and, the connection remaining unbroken when he dropped the telephone receiver, I also heard the blow dealt him, and then his fall to the floor. Really he deserves much credit for his courage, and for his efforts in your behalf. Help Smith into his coat, Jimmie, and I will see him safely home and abed."

"But is there no hope, no clue upon which to work?" demanded Hersey, white with distress. "The man at the Hoffman House—if you could only secure him."

"Nonsense!" growled Boyd contemptuously. "He has dusted long before now. No, no, Mr. Hersey, there at present is not the slightest clue, I am very sorry to admit."

"Then, God help me, I am almost ruined!"

"Yet you must leave the case entirely to me, Mr. Hersey, and I will do all I can with it. I can give you no encouragement of any immediate results, yet I shall do what is possible. Give the facts no publicity, mind you, but leave all to me."

"But, Mr. Boyd——"

"Really, Hersey, there are no buts admissible, if I am to continue my interest in the case," Boyd pointedly interrupted, signing for Galvin to open the office door. "I will see you again in the course of a few days, and report anything I may discover. Give Smith your arm, Jimmie, and we'll get him out to a carriage. We are up against it again all right. The Big Finger has got in his work once more, take my word for that."

"Sure thing!" growled Coleman, as he supported Smith from the office. "It is the work of the same old gang. Only their infernally long-headed rascal of a chief could have devised such a snake's game as this."

"Right you are, Jimmie! And the crafty cur hasn't left us a thread worth following. Steady, Smith; dear fellow! Still a bit weak in the legs, eh? No wonder—no wonder! But a day or two abed will set you right, so keep a stiff upper lip. This way with him, Jimmie! I'll go on ahead and hail a cab!"

So they made their way out of the office and out of the building, and one would have said that Felix Boyd was all at sea.

Not far from eight o'clock that evening, however, while Jimmie Coleman sat smoking in the men's room at police headquarters, a desk man from the outer office hurriedly entered the room and tossed Coleman a telegram. The central office man quickly opened it, and read:

"Bridge Street station, Flushing. Rush. Boyd."

Terse though it was the message told Coleman that Boyd wished to be met at the station mentioned, and at the earliest possible moment.

"Something serious in the wind!" thought Coleman, as he prepared to go. "Surely it cannot relate to that Hersey case, for Boyd was badly balked by that. Luckily I can just catch a train, barring detentions. No doubt he figured on that, and on hitting me here at this hour, since he never misses anything worth hitting. Well, I'm not the man to disappoint him!"

"Slipping an extra revolver into his pocket, Coleman hastened by ferry and rail to Flushing, and arrived at the Bridge Street station about an hour after receiving the telegram.

Not a little to his surprise, however, he could discover no sign of Felix Boyd. There were but few people about the station, and for nearly ten minutes Coleman chafed uneasily under his misgivings, now feeling sure that Boyd's mission, whatever it was, had taken him away, and possibly into danger.

While still in doubt what course to pursue, he was hurriedly approached by a lad of a dozen years or so, evidently a street gamin, who suddenly had appeared upon the scene and was much winded from running.

"I say, mister!" he exclaimed quite breathlessly. "Is yer name Jimmie Coleman?"

III.

The night sky was partly obscured by a mist that swept inland from over the bay, and by darker clouds gathered here and there, through the rifts of which a few stars brighter than their celestial neighbors could at times be faintly discerned.

Felix Boyd, however, had no eyes for clouds or stars that evening. At about the time Jimmie Coleman was accosted by the unknown lad at the Bridge Street station, Boyd was crouching alone outside of a west window of an inferior wooden dwelling nearly a mile away—an isolated old house close upon the bay, the gray walls of which and the general aspect of decay told of half a century of exposure to wind and weather. One room only was lighted, at the window of which Boyd had for some

time been crouching, peering through a small rent in the soiled and faded curtain. Through the loose window-frame the sound of the voices within plainly reached his ears.

The room was dimly lighted by the rays of a smoky oil-lamp in a bracket on the wall. A square deal-table without a cover occupied the middle of the room, which plainly was the dining-room of a dwelling then unoccupied by any tenant.

There were three men seated there, while a fourth stood leaning on the table, upon which he had tossed an unkempt red wig and beard, evidently a discarded disguise. His slouch hat was pushed back from his brow, disclosing a long, dark bruise, which seemed to lose itself in his disordered hair.

Ben Smith—the chief clerk at the office of Hersey & Co.

Of the three men the clerk had come there to meet, one was a stranger to Felix Boyd. The other two Boyd had not seen for some weeks, on which occasion he had stood face to face with them in the secret subterranean chamber of this gang of malefactors, and bluffed half-a-score of them into suffering him to escape.

Of the two men recognized by Boyd, one was a fellow named Busby, probably the scamp closest to the chief of the gang. And the second, seated in a chair near the dingy wall, was none other than the chief himself, that obscure and crafty criminal genius so long sought by Felix Boyd, and known among his confederates as the Big Finger.

Yet the strong, malevolent face of this archcriminal then was far less stern and hard than that of the man watching him from outside, and who then was listening to what Smith was saying.

"Kelley yet to come, eh? Damn him, I ought to have it in for him! There was no need of his laying me out with so hard a crack. A less brutal blow would have served."

Ignoring the sly grin that rose to Busby's face, the chief drew forward in his chair and replied, with a deliberation that accentuated his vicious meaning:

"No purpose of ours, Mr. Smith, is served by any

half-hearted measure. We never do things by halves. If you resent the blow which Kelley dealt you, learn now that it was delivered under my instructions, and therefore you may expend your wrath upon me."

The voice of the speaker carried a subtle threat, and Smith drew in his horns and laughed uneasily.

"Oh, I am not deeply cut over it, since it was necessary," he replied. "Yet had I not come round before I was discovered, I might possibly have split the whole business while regaining consciousness."

"Since you did not, why speculate upon it?" queried the chief acidly. "Furthermore, though the blow hurt, you have a very soothing balm for the wound. Fifty thousand dollars is a rich remuneration for a single knock-out blow. That was to be your part of the stake, I believe."

"Yes! Nor is it any too much, to my way of thinking!"

"Nor any too little, to mine," retorted the chief, with subtle austerity. "Understand me, Mr. Smith. But for us, and the craft and cunning we are able to employ, you could have played no such game as that now so successfully terminated, despite the readiness with which you accepted our invitation to become a partner therein. We did most of the work, and faced most of the danger. At no time during the game were you in peril, for had Kelley been discovered and exposed by your associate clerks, you still could have denied any knowledge of the fraud. Nor would you have been betrayed, since loyalty to a loyal confederate is one of our most binding ties. So, in getting the portion mentioned, Mr. Smith, you will get all that you have earned, and all that you deserve. Let that settle it."

"Sure that settles it," nodded Smith, a little awed by the other's icy voice and penetrating scrutiny. "I'm satisfied, if you are."

"If we were not, you would promptly be informed."

"And the money—was it brought here?" demanded Smith. "That was the agreement."

"We always do all that we agree, Mr. Smith," was the caustic rejoinder. "The provision upon which you insisted, that the money should remain intact and be

brought here for division thus soon after the crime, was not entirely to my liking. Yet your resolution to that effect left me no alternative but to assent. Understand me, however. I demurred only in apprehension that you might not be able to hoodwink that evil genius, Felix Boyd, after we had rung him into the affair solely with a view to avert suspicion from you. The design was crafty, however, and I am glad that you feel positive that it was successfully executed."

"Positive—well! I should say so!" cried Smith, with a derisive laugh. "Felix Boyd, indeed! Why, sir, no bat was ever more completely blinded. Though he laid the crime to you and your gang, he was forced to admit to Hersey that you had not left a clue—not the slightest clue!"

"Yet Boyd is artful—infernally artful! Are you sure he meant all he said?"

"As sure as I am of death and taxes," cried Smith, laughing shrilly. "Why, sir, he even assured Hersey that I was in no way culpable, but deserved much credit for my endeavor to save the plunder. Come, come, sir; is it here? Let the division be made, then. I have no wish to hang about here longer than necessary."

"Nor have I—far from it!" rejoined the chief, with sinister significance.

"Get at it, then."

"Where's the grip, Busby?"

"Right here, old man. It's hardly left my hand since I got it from Kelley, who made off home to shake his Hersey togs."

"I've seen him since," was the reply, while Busby placed a stout leather bag on the table and proceeded to unlock it. "He may not show up at all. I sent him to Pine Street at five o'clock."

"That so? For what?"

"To locate that infernal hoodoo of ours, Felix Boyd," the chief grimly answered. "Kelley placed him all right, and telephoned me at six. The kid in Boyd's office said that Boyd was at police headquarters with Jimmie Coleman. Probably working up this case. I reckon 'twas true enough, for Boyd wouldn't look for any of us at his office."

"Humph! Not much!"

"I aimed only to make sure that he wasn't wiser than we knew, and maybe on the heels of——"

The chief concluded with a significant glance in Smith's direction, then reached for a package of bank-notes which Busby removed from the bag.

For a moment the flinty hardness of Felix Boyd's countenance relaxed a little, and he murmured complacently:

"Luckily I did anticipate just that move, and instructed Terry accordingly. So there's their plunder, eh? I must recover that, at least, cost what it may. And it's up to me to play a lone hand against them, I'm blessed if it isn't."

He peered back over his shoulder through the semi-darkness of the night, toward the desolate country road by which he had come, but no sign of any approaching person rewarded his searching glances.

Once more he gazed through the rent in the curtain, and fixed in mind every feature of the dismal room. Next he shifted his revolvers to the side pockets of his short reefer, and then silently left the window and stole to the opposite side of the house.

There he found that he could slip his knife-blade between the loose sashes of one of the windows. To throw the catch unheard, and then raise the lower sash, required a little time and much caution; but he finally accomplished both, and then silently entered the room.

It adjoined a narrow hall leading toward the dining-room; and Boyd, after listening for a moment, decided that further delay would be dangerous. Within a very few minutes the knaves would be making off with their divided booty. Boyd drew both revolvers, then stole softly through the hall.

"Fifty thousand—that's right," Smith then was saying. "Yet I'd sooner have had smaller bills——"

"You'll have none of them, Smith!" Boyd coolly interrupted, stepping suddenly into the room with both weapons leveled. "Quiet, you fellows! The first move will invite a bullet! Now, up with your hands, every man of you, or there'll be a corpse here! Steady, there, Busby! Don't think of bolting for the kitchen, for I'll

shoot you dead before you can reach the threshold! You, Smith, edge a little to the left, so that I may cover all hands more easily. Careful—that'll do, you dog!"

Half-smothered ejaculations of dismay, and the sound of quickened snarls of rage—these were the demonstrations which followed Boyd's sudden entrance and accompanied his sharp utterances, a series of commands and threats spoken with a voice so cold and penetrating that not a word was lost, the while his stern, white face wore a look no man among them dared to disregard.

Within half-a-minute he had the four men lined back against the wall, three of them seated with hands upraised, and Smith standing a few feet aside, as white as a ghost when he now realized his ruinous situation.

"Very good, you fellows!" added Boyd. "Bear in mind that I'm a dead shot with a gun, and the first man who stirs will be the first to go under. So don't be the first, any one of you."

"My God, I'm ruined!" groaned Smith involuntarily.

"Not the slightest doubt of it," said Boyd bluntly.

Then he took a chair at the side of the table opposite the four, that he might rest his elbows on the table and steady his constantly leveled weapons, under which a more powerless group of rascals scarce could be conceived.

"You're an infernal blockhead, damn you!" the chief bitterly snarled, referring to Smith. "And I've been a cursed fool for once in my life!"

"Quite correct, Mr. Big Finger," nodded Boyd, with a swift glance at his distorted face. "I think my trap will hold you this time."

"Don't you be too sure of it," the knave fiercely sneered. "Four to one are long odds, for all you now have the best of us."

"Well, don't you be the first to move, or the odds will be reduced in a way you'll not fancy," retorted Boyd sternly. "And you, Busby, look to yourself! I've an eye for every man of you."

"You be damned!" growled Busby, white with impotent rage.

"Now, Smith, you do what I command," said Boyd sharply. "I want this money repacked in this bag. To

this end of the table—steady! not too fast! Now you're right. Pack it all in again. Now buckle the strap. Now fall back where you were, and throw up your hands. Correct!"

Smith had obeyed like an affrighted child, and the leather bag, with the stolen cash secured in it, now stood on the table at Boyd's elbow.

Not one of the gang had raised an objection, nor stirred hand or foot, but their enraged faces were speaking volumes.

"Yes, Smith, wise for once in your life," repeated Boyd, with subtle irony. "You should have been as wise when you lay stretched on the floor of Hersey's office. Remember this, you foolish fellow: The pulse of a man knocked out with a sand-bag does not beat in the nineties. The throb of your excited blood was alone enough to betray you, and the moment I felt your wrist I knew you were shamming."

"Idiot!"

The single word, a bitter, malignant hiss, came from the twitching lips of the master criminal.

"Idiot is right," said Boyd curtly. "When I learned that he was shamming, it became very easy to make a countermove against him, to let him think himself unsuspected and me utterly blinded, and then prepare to run him and you to cover. I wasn't looking for a division of the plunder quite so quickly, Mr. Big Finger, but I think the trap will serve."

"Not much!" cried the chief. "We still are four to one, and can sit here as long as you can. Some day, damn you, I'll have you under my heel."

"Oh, I think not," interrupted Boyd. "The boot already is on the other leg. You'll sit right here until the help arrives for which I have sent, and then——"

But then there came the very last move any mortal man could have anticipated.

Their partly expected confederate, Kelley, had arrived, and through the window had observed the situation within.

Fortunately for Boyd, the miscreant happened to be unarmed, so could not shoot him; but the crafty fellow, who so cleverly had impersonated Banker Hersey, had

stolen unheard into the dark kitchen of the house, then crept cautiously under the table at which Boyd was seated, in a position that made the cunning move comparatively easy.

The next moment Boyd's legs were seized and he was jerked half out of his chair, while Kelley yelled wildly from under the swaying table:

"Nail him, boys! Now nail him!"

The gang leaped forward like men electrified, and Boyd fired wildly and missed.

Then the side window was beaten in with a crash, and a second weapon rang through the house, followed by a roar from Jimmie Coleman.

Busby went to the floor with a bullet in his shoulder, while Smith, observing Coleman at the window, yelled wildly:

"The cops! They're here already!"

With an upward sweep of his arm, the chief of the gang instantly hurled the lamp from the bracket, leaving the room in Egyptian darkness.

The struggle that followed was confined to the two men still on the floor, for the others of the gang, seeing Coleman and fearing that a squad of officers might be with him, thought only of escape and fled through the house. Yet Smith did not know the way as well as the others, and Coleman nabbed him at the door.

When the affray terminated, moreover, Boyd had Kelley in irons, the bag of stolen cash in his possession, and Coleman had Smith and Busby prisoners, the latter badly wounded.

Yet again the chief of the gang had evaded Felix Boyd, escaping through one of the smallest loopholes of his evil career.

Boyd restored Hersey's money next morning, giving the banker the surprise of his life.

As remarked by him, Boyd's first suspicion of Smith's treachery to his employer, and his immediate insight into the game attempted, resulted from his feeling Smith's pulse, which he had done only to learn whether the clerk was dead or alive. Then a square section of disturbed dust on the rug, and flecks of lint on the heavy book on the table near-by, told Boyd what he had heard

fall, the book having been thrown down by Kelley immediately after striking Smith, and solely with a view that Boyd should hear it through the telephone, the circuit having been left open.

Thus it at once became plain to Boyd that he probably was up against the same old gang, and that their design was to avert suspicion from the dishonest clerk. Hence Boyd's countermove to reassure Smith and take him home, after which he constantly watched his house, and saw him leave in disguise that very evening. Boyd then shadowed him to Flushing, where Smith waited in a saloon for some time, evidently a prearranged hour, before proceeding to the rendezvous described, which was a dwelling recently occupied by Busby, and of which he still had the keys.

While waiting Smith's next move, Boyd had telegraphed to Coleman. Before the latter could arrive, however, Smith started for the house, and Boyd was obliged to shadow him. Never at a loss for resources, Boyd picked up a lad and took him along until he had the house located, then sent the boy back to bring Coleman, or a policeman in case of his failing to find the central office man.

Coleman was on hand, however, and arrived at the house just after Kelley, and with the results depicted. The criminals secured got their just deserts, it may incidentally be added; but Felix Boyd had by no means seen the last of their rascally chief.

The Case of the Missing Magnate,

I.

Mr. Felix Boyd hooked his thumbs into the armholes of his vest, and surveyed with a semiquizzical eye the Wall Street magnate into whose private office he had, with an air of indolent interest, quietly sauntered.

"What are you afraid of, Gregson?" he asked, halting in a familiar way near the banker's desk.

It was barely nine o'clock, yet Gregson, of Gregson & Green, already was down for business. He long had been a figure in Wall Street, this Gregson and his millions; and, just at this time, he was *the* figure. For his stupendous operations in Northern Traction had set the entire Street aghast.

Yet, that Gregson was a man of shrewdest methods, as well as artful and unmercifully aggressive and daring with his financial power, men of the Street had, on more than one occasion, learned to their bitter cost; and few were inclined to flatly declare in the present instance that he did not know what he was about.

Actions frequently speak louder than words, however, and the bitterness born of depleted bank deposits creates an undying thirst for vengeance. Hence Gregson's present mystification of the public over some coming deal in Northern Traction, by which lever he long had been lifting the stock at extraordinary strides, and finally had invited the opposition of an army of financial foes, resulting in the piling up of a short interest against him of colossal proportions.

Gregson had the name of being, at such times, a fiercely wicked antagonist. When it was up to him to make good, Gregson invariably was there with both feet. Nor in the present case had he showed the first sign of weakening. With aggressive confidence, backed with a

buying power that appeared utterly inexhaustible, he never once had wavered under the repeated drives made at his new financial hobby-horse, until wisecracks not involved in the bitter conflict were beginning to dryly remark, with an amusement disinterested observers only can feel over one of Wall Street's "mysteries," not that Gregson was the president of Northern Traction—as was really the case—but that Gregson was Northern Traction itself, and his associates therein only a lot of ciphers.

The actual facts concerning Northern Traction, however, of whatever they consisted, are not here essential; for they have only an indirect bearing upon the present visit and subsequent work of Mr. Felix Boyd in the exceedingly peculiar case now presented.

Gregson looked quickly up at him, somewhat surprised by his unexpected entrance, and more by his curious question.

"Afraid of?" he echoed inquiringly.

"Yes, Gregson," nodded Boyd, still smiling oddly. "Of what are you afraid?"

Gregson grunted impatiently over his mail, at which he occasionally shook his head like a baited bull; but presently he snorted, like one a bit perplexed:

"Afraid of, Boyd? Of God—and the Wall Street bears!"

And then the magnate of Northern Traction threw himself back in his desk chair and gave way to a long, resonant laugh, which dispelled for a time, at least, the lines of care from his refined, resolute face—that of a man of nearly sixty.

"Why, Boyd, my dear fellow!" he presently cried, when he could govern his amusement, "what a curious question!"

"It emanates from a rather more serious impression on my part than you appear to imagine," said Felix Boyd more gravely. "You should know, Gregson, that I am not one to idly intrude upon the time of a man as busy as yourself."

"So I do, Boyd, for a fact," the banker quickly answered. "What do you mean? Explain yourself."

"Have you any reason to fear a secret foe, Mr. Greg-

son, who would do you personal injury if he had a chance?"

Gregson laughed.

"I have an abundance of foes, all right," he replied significantly; "but I hardly think they are of the order of ruffians. No, no, Boyd; I know of no man who deliberately would do me personal injury. Why do you ask?"

"Because I discovered several days ago, Gregson, that you were being constantly shadowed by a man who——"

Gregson interrupted him with a laugh that made the room ring.

"Ah, I see!" he exclaimed, when he could suppress his risibility. "You have discovered my shadow, eh? You have tumbled to Finley. Why, Boyd, dear fellow, that chap is my private body-guard."

"Your body-guard?"

"Precisely—nothing less!" cried Gregson, who appeared immensely tickled over the idea, as well as by Boyd's manifest perplexity. "My body-guard—yes, that's the term. I've had him at my heels for more than a week. Like the autocrat of all the Russias, I thus insure proper regard for my august person, which, as Northern Traction soars higher, certainly should command a corresponding degree of respect."

Boyd smiled only faintly.

"Pshaw!" Gregson then added abruptly: "Levity aside, Boyd, there's really nothing in this little discovery of yours. But I now see why you have called, and with so curious a question."

"Since you say it's all right, Gregson, of course it's no affair for me to meddle with," Boyd indifferently rejoined. "Glad to hear you say so. You are one of my clients, you know, over all of whom and whose interests I am employed to feel a constant care. Hence, when I discover anything out of the ordinary, I invariably look into it."

"Quite right, certainly; and very good of you."

"I observed, only by chance, that you were being watched by the party mentioned," Boyd deliberately explained, buttoning his coat, as if about to depart. "At odd times I since have kept an eye on him, without his

knowing it, and found that he was very persistently upon your track."

"Good enough!" laughed Gregson. "That speaks well for his devotion. Very glad to hear it."

"Still," added Boyd languidly, "I thought I'd drop in and learn what it signified."

"Perfectly right."

"Novel idea of yours, Gregson, this employing a man to watch over you. Not usual among men of your walk in life."

"True," smiled Gregson, with merely an upward glance from a letter he had begun reading. "Novel idea, indeed. But don't give me any credit for it, my dear Boyd. It was Finley's idea, not mine."

"That so?" queried Boyd indifferently.

Yet he decided to linger briefly, and rested his elbow on the top of the banker's roll-top desk. Gregson did not appear to mind. He continued reading his letters, one after the other, and in the meantime talked jerkily at intervals with his questioner.

"Yes, Finley's idea," said he. "No funeral of mine. Not so bad a scheme, at that—as you'll admit. Happened in this way——"

"Well?"

"What was I saying?"

"About how it happened, Mr. Gregson."

"Oh, yes! Met him just as I was coming in here one morning about a week ago—had seen him outside half-a-dozen times before. Wondered who he was—seemed sort of keeping an eye on me, as you say. So I let him have a few words with me, and he then explained that—— Humph! Philip!"

"Yes, sir!" This from a clerk who came rushing in.

"Send Burton & Pollock a current certificate for ten thousand Northern Traction, and have it charged to loan account. Here—wait! Hand this letter to the cashier, and tell him to advise the writer that we have ample time money at our command. That's all now. Where was I at, Boyd?"

"About the chap you met in the corridor, who——"

"Ah, yes! I stopped to hear what he had to say. He said he feared that I possibly noticed him at times——"

meant no harm in watching me, however. I asked him what his object was in so doing, and he then—he then explained that he——”

“I fear that I am encroaching on your time.”

“Oh, no, you’re not. I can talk with you while running through my mail.”

“And he said?”

“Oh, he explained that he had been following the market for a time, and had gone long of Northern Traction—at which I told him he was a wise young man,” Gregson continued, in a desultory fashion. “He said he believed that I knew what I was doing, and would presently boom the stock well above par—wise again, you see! And I’ll do better, even, than that, Boyd; you see if I don’t. Then God help these shorts, when I finally put on the twisters. I’ll squeeze ’em till they wish they had—— Bah! What was I saying, Boyd?”

“About what Finley said in explanation——”

“Of shadowing me—ah, yes! He said he was long of the stock, and at times worried by its occasional breaks. Damned bears, you see! Said he couldn’t help dreading that something might happen to me—some mishap—or that some enemy on the bear side of the market might attempt to put out my light. So he was keeping an eye on me most of the time, with a view to my personal safety—detective-like, you see.”

“Ah, yes,” nodded Boyd. “Precisely.”

“Idea rather pleased me, as well as his kindly interest, and I told him to go ahead—look after me as carefully as he liked,” Gregson glibly went on, with his attention vacillating between his letters and his story, in which latter Felix Boyd was displaying only a cursory interest. “I told him I would pay him for his time, by the way, after I had worked this deal in Traction to a finish.”

“Hired him, eh?” murmured Boyd.

“Yes, in a way. Bright fellow enough, Boyd, so don’t bother him. Full name, did you ask? Martin Finley, I think he said. Wait a moment! I believe I have his card here, if I haven’t mislaid it. Ah! here it is—yes, Martin Finley. Evidently employed by the Metropolitan Private Detective Bureau, Jacob Kelp, manager, Garside

Building, corner of—but, here; take the card and read it yourself, if you like.”

Boyd indifferently accepted the engraved card and silently read it. In the lower left corner the name of Martin Finley appeared in modest letters. Then he quietly replaced it upon Gregson’s desk, remarking in careless tones:

“I had not thought of the fellow in that light, Gregson. Evidently he is a detective—one of the unofficial sleuths.”

“Detective—yes, certainly,” nodded Gregson, over the letter he then was reading. “That’s one reason why I quite favorably regarded the man, and his suggestion to look after me.”

“And it is a very good reason why he should not learn that I detected him in his excellent work, and regarded him with suspicion,” said Felix Boyd quite pointedly. “A brother detective might feel hurt, Gregson, if he knew of it. You’d better say nothing to him about it, or about me.”

“Very well.”

“If he has seen me come here this morning, and later asks you any questions concerning my mission, you may state that I called on other business.”

“Surely, Boyd, if you wish it,” growled Gregson, with a first sign of impatience. “But I’m not likely to have any words with him—far from it. Haven’t spoken to him, or he to me, since that first day.”

Boyd laughed softly.

“You merely leave him to look after you in his own peculiar way, eh?”

“That’s it, precisely.”

“Not a bad idea, either,” drawled Boyd. “I was a little blind, or I might have thought of it. Sorry to have annoyed you, Gregson.”

“No annoyance—none whatever. Call again, whenever you— Here, Philip!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good morning, Gregson.”

“Good morning, Boyd; good morning. Philip, you telephone Vandyke Bros. that we will loan them Northern Traction flat, but subject to—”

Felix Boyd heard no more, for he had sauntered quietly out, as he had sauntered quietly in a short time before. He appeared, moreover, utterly oblivious to the existence of Martin Finley, the banker's voluntary body-guard, whom he presently saw loitering in the public corridor adjoining the elaborate offices of Messrs. Gregson & Green.

He was not a bad-looking fellow, on the whole, this Finley; plainly not more than twenty-five years of age, with a beardless and rather youthful face, quite frank of expression. If he was speculating in Northern Traction, as he had stated, it seemed quite probable that one of his years and inexperience might be a victim to the apprehensions mentioned, and that he really felt a genuine care over the magnate in whose glowing predictions and bullish operations his own hopes and prospects were involved. In a way, his story was plausible enough; and, since Gregson plainly was satisfied with it, why should another interfere? Indeed, Mr. Felix Boyd had no immediate intention of so doing.

During the following month, however, Boyd occasionally noticed that young Finley still was engaged in his good work, and that neither his looks nor his actions invited serious suspicion.

Upon entering his Pine Street office one morning, Boyd found Jimmie Coleman, his intimate friend of the central office, reading one of the morning papers, and smoking a very black and malodorous cigar.

"Goodness, Jimmie!" exclaimed Boyd, sniffing the air with a grimace. "What are you smoking—a piece of rope?"

Coleman laughed loudly, and tossed the offensive weed into a cuspidor.

"Not exactly, Felix," said he. "I've been trying for some time to decide just what brand it is."

"It smells like a burning rag."

"It was given to me by Darby, at headquarters; so I thought I'd take one chance with it," laughed Coleman. "But never again! I've often wondered why Darby has so few intimate friends. Your boy, Terry, has just run out for a few minutes. Have you seen the morning paper?"

"Not yet," replied Boyd, slipping into his office coat. "Anything in it worth telling?"

"Only a hot time in the market yesterday. The bears got after Gregson with an ax, and gave him an awful shaking."

"That so?" queried Boyd, filling his pipe.

"They knocked Northern Traction off nine points, and it closed at the lowest."

"Humph! That looks bad for Gregson."

"The bears caught the stop-loss orders of a lot of Gregson's blind followers, and gave the stock quite a rattling. It doesn't surprise me any. I've been expecting it."

"Why so, Jimmie?"

"Chiefly because of past observations," explained Coleman. "I never knew a stock to be boomed on a mystery, so-called, that a crash did not follow the boom. Gregson has bulled Northern Traction well above par, and all on the strength of something favorable that's going to happen. Why the deuce doesn't he state what the deal is to be? It may be all right, you know; I don't say it isn't. But it certainly has a fishy look."

"Gregson is not a man easily downed," observed Boyd thoughtfully.

"That's true enough," admitted Coleman. "He has stood like Gibraltar against raids that would have demoralized a less aggressive and resourceful operator. This paper states that he bought a thousand shares yesterday after the market, at two points above the closing; but I reckon that was a move only to steady the opening this morning. He is still predicting higher prices, but it's my opinion that a crash is about due."

"You seem quite confident of it, Jimmie."

"Because I know that a strong bear pool is now at work, of which Jack Pollock is the head and front," replied Coleman. "Pollock is a bad man to buck against, particularly when he has a raft of other men's money to work with. There were rumors galore last night after the break. Some say Gregson is going to pieces mentally under the strain. He looks badly enough, for a fact. Pollock boasts that he will put the stock to fifty, a drop of more than sixty points."

"Humph!" grunted Boyd rather contemptuously. "I don't fancy Pollock. He's capable of any sort of a dirty move that would enable him to make a profitable turn in the market."

"What of Gregson?"

"There is no comparison between them," replied Boyd promptly. "Gregson is a big and brainy man, and Pollock never saw the day that he was in Gregson's class. As for Gregson's methods with Northern Traction, and his so-called mystery, I have an idea that it is all right, and that Gregson knows what he is about. It's not always feasible, you know, to make advance publications of as big a deal as might be made with Northern Traction."

"That may be true."

"Well, this break of nine points will give the shorts a chance to cover."

"Cover be blowed!" laughed Coleman. "There'll be mighty little covering done at the present level, you can gamble on that. Pollock and his push have been on the short side from the start, and only a genuine crash can let them out with whole skins. If Gregson can hold the market, he yet may win out; but it now looks to me——"

"Well, well, my money goes on Gregson," interposed Boyd. "He's one of my clients, Jimmie, and I cannot go back on them. It's my private opinion that Gregson is all right."

"Well, there'll be a mighty hot time in to-day's market, you can go the limit on that," declared Coleman.

"No doubt," assented Boyd thoughtfully. "By the way, Jimmie, did you ever hear of the Metropolitan Private Detective Bureau, of this city?"

Coleman looked quickly up at this abrupt turn of the talk, and presently nodded in the affirmative.

"Yes, Felix; I have heard of it."

"Do you know anything about the concern?"

"Not a great deal," said Coleman. "It is managed by a man named Kelp, I believe. Properly licensed, I understand, but not identified with the official forces. It's all right, I guess."

"Ever seen the manager, Kelp?"

"I don't think so. I never bother with these unofficial— Hello! what's coming?"

The fall of hurried feet were sounding on the corridor stairs, and in a minute the door of Boyd's office was thrown violently open, and a young man entered, wild-eyed and white with excitement.

"Thank Heaven I find you, Mr. Boyd!" he cried breathlessly. "You're wanted at once—at our office—Gregson & Green! Green is almost crazy! Come at once, if you possibly——"

"Stop a bit!" coolly demanded Felix Boyd. "What is wrong at your office?"

"Something has happened to Gregson! He cannot be found!"

II.

Boyd rose quickly to his feet, and came out of his office coat.

"Missing! Gregson missing!" he cried, with an ominous knitting of his brows. "Since when, Philip?"

"Not sure about it—sometime last night, I think," hurriedly replied the clerk, who was the same Boyd had seen in Gregson's office a month before.

"Wasn't he at home last night?"

"Yes, sir, till early evening. Not there this morning. His wife just telephoned to Mr. Green—blessed if I know what, sir! Only know that Mr. Green was knocked almost daffy, and yelled for me to bring you without an instant's delay. Can't you come at once, sir?"

The face of Felix Boyd was growing strangely drawn and hard, as of one deeply stirred and bitterly determined. For all of thirty seconds he stood absolutely motionless, speaking not a word, but with his dilated eyes frowning at the floor at his feet. If one could have snapped a photograph of his brain, one would have pictured a mental riot—that of a man who hurriedly measured each and every possibility suggested by the circumstances already known to him; and who, keenly realizing that his own reputation was involved in the welfare of his client, fiercely strove to fix upon the speediest and most promising line of action.

He grasped at the one clue suggesting itself, much as a drowning man grasps at a straw; and, having seized his street coat from the peg on which he had hung it, he turned abruptly to Coleman and asked:

"Anything doing, Jimmie?"

"Not at present," replied Coleman, quick to read the meaning of this change in his friend. "I'll lend you a hand in any way."

"Good enough! I've an idea I shall need you. Go along with this clerk and wait for me at Gregson's office. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Where are you——"

"Don't stop to question me, Jimmie, dear fellow, but get away at once," cried Boyd. "Wait a bit! If you see a youngish chap hanging about there, with smooth face and grayish eyes, ask him if his name is Finley. If it is, nail him and hang on till I come. I want Finley!"

The central office man nodded understandingly, and hastened away with the clerk. That Boyd already had formed some sort of a theory, Coleman had not a doubt.

Boyd dashed off a line for his office boy, then hastened out, and hailed a cab.

"To the Garside Building, cabbie!" he cried. "And don't spare your horse."

The building mentioned was one of those down-town sky-scrapers which tower like huge obelisks above their crowded neighbors, and within five minutes Boyd was dropped at the street door. Commanding the cabbie to wait, he hastened to the elevator and learned that the parties he sought occupied a suite of offices on the top floor.

"Elevated in one sense, at least," Boyd said to himself, as the car sped upward.

Attached to the office door which he presently approached was a showy brass plate, inscribed with black letters:

METROPOLITAN PRIVATE DETECTIVE BUREAU

J. Kelp, Manager

Still with a rather threatening gleam in the depths of his gray eyes, Boyd unceremoniously entered, and curtsy

greeted a tall, cadaverous young man who quickly rose from a desk near the window.

"Good morning. I'm looking for Mr. Kelp."

"Mr. Kelp—oh, that's unfortunate, sir!" said the cadaverous man, with an obsequious bow. "Mr. Kelp is in Chicago. Our assistant manager, Mr. Vogle, is here. Will he answer?"

"Yes, I will see Mr. Vogle."

"Your card——"

"No card this time. Merely say that Felix Boyd wants to see him."

"Just one moment, sir."

The cadaverous young man appeared a little startled by Boyd's brusque manner, and the latter detected his nervous change of color as he hurriedly turned and vanished into an inner office. Presently he reappeared, however, smiling graciously, and rubbing his hands.

"Mr. Vogle will see you, Mr. Boyd," said he, bowing himself aside for Boyd to enter.

A burly, well-dressed man, with a large, florid face, looked up at Boyd through a pair of bushy eyebrows, but did not rise from the desk at which he was seated. He was not a prepossessing man, and his sonorous voice had a rasping harshness quite in accord with his looks.

"Mr. Felix Boyd, I am told," said he. "Take a seat. What can I do for you, Mr. Boyd?"

"I wish to learn what I can about your man Finley," said Boyd, with some suavity. "No, thank you, I will not sit. I shall intrude only briefly."

"Finley—Finley?" muttered Vogle audibly. "Oh, you must refer to young Martin Finley."

"I believe that is his name."

"Yes, yes! I didn't place it at first. Bless your heart, Mr. Boyd, he is not one of our men—that is, not one of our regulars."

"Do you mean that he is not regularly employed by you?"

"Precisely. It is only rarely that we have work for one of his years and experience. We have used him at odd times, however; the last being—let me see——*Belcher!*"

The cadaverous man quickly appeared at the door.

"When did we last employ Martin Finley? Do you remember?"

"About three months ago, sir, I think. On the Billings's divorce——"

"That'll do!" snapped Vogle, at which Belcher vanished as quickly as he had appeared. "What about Finley, Mr. Boyd? Nothing wrong with Finley, is there? Has he referred you to us?"

"Well, not exactly," smiled Boyd. "Still, since I am here, I would like to ask if you consider him quite trustworthy?"

"Yes, perfectly so," Vogle promptly declared, with a nod of his ponderous head. "As square as a brick, Mr. Boyd. Cannot say much for his ability, for he is young yet; but his honesty—there's no question about that!"

"A remarkably positive opinion, coming from one who at first could not even recall Finley's name," reasoned Boyd distrustfully, as he bowed himself out after thanking his informant. "I'm blessed if I quite fancy that joint, despite its fine furnishings and an aspect of eminent respectability."

Instead of hurrying away, Boyd lingered in the corridor for a few moments, and presently he heard the distant tinkle of a telephone bell, evidently from one of the inner rooms of the private detective bureau.

"Communicating with somebody, eh? That's about what I suspected," he grimly muttered. "Now for Gregson's office—and for Finley! This is a deucedly fine-spun thread, I'm blessed if it isn't. Yet it's a thread worth following—so here goes!"

It was precisely half-past nine when Boyd arrived at the office of Gregson & Green, where he found the clerks in confusion, and Green in a state of mind bordering on distraction.

"I've seen nothing of Finley," Coleman whispered to Boyd, when the latter entered.

"Unless I am off the track, Jimmie, he'll presently show up," Boyd quietly replied, with a significant wink. "In which case leave him entirely to me. Got a disguise with you?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Go out and get into it. Then wait on the curbing

opposite the street door. Watch for any cue that I may give you."

"Trust me for that, Felix!"

Coleman nodded, and presently withdrew, while Boyd hastened to relieve the impatience of Gregson's partner, and learn what he knew of the latter's mysterious absence.

It appeared that Gregson lived in Ravenswood, where he long had owned and occupied a fine old wooden mansion, having a park and quite extensive grounds along the bank of the river. His household comprised only his wife and a maiden sister, and two female servants. He had dined at home as usual the previous evening, after which he had gone alone to his boat-house, intending to row about on the river until dusk, his habitual recreation at that hour when the weather permitted. He had not, however, since leaving his dwelling that evening, been seen by any of its inmates.

The circumstances under which his absence was not discovered until the next morning were not at all extraordinary. Gregson occupied a chamber apart from that of his wife, and he had, during his recent stress of business, frequently worked nearly all night in his library on the ground floor. At dusk the previous evening a servant had lighted the library lamp as usual, and then closed the door of the room. At nine o'clock the family had retired, under the impression that Gregson had returned home, and was at work in the library.

Next morning, after preparing breakfast, the servant had found the library lamp still burning, and at once spread the alarm. A search quickly revealed that Gregson had not occupied his chamber, nor had he returned from the river. His light overcoat was found lying on the boat-house float, and his boat, an ordinary lap-streak rowboat, was missing. Despite his skill as a boatman, the evidence strongly indicated that some accident had befallen Gregson, and that he had been drowned.

Vainly hoping that her husband had left his boat somewhere, however, and returned to his office in the city, a possibility suggested by the important business then engaging him, Mrs. Gregson had hurriedly telephoned

the startling facts to Mr. Green, who had arrived early that morning at the firm's office.

It took Felix Boyd several minutes to get these details of the case, which certainly would have presented to most men nothing of a very encouraging nature. Yet Boyd's forceful countenance took on an expression of ugly determination while he listened, which was vividly in contrast with the ghastly perturbation and dismay of Gregson's partner.

"What did you advise Mrs. Gregson to do about the case?" Boyd quickly demanded, upon learning the facts mentioned.

"I told her to do absolutely nothing until after I had consulted you," Green excitedly rejoined.

"Very good. Glad you did so."

"I sent Philip after you at once. I since have been on nettles. In fact, Mr. Boyd, I am almost distracted. This calamity could not have occurred at a worse time, for our business is fatally——"

"Stop a bit!" Boyd sharply interrupted. "You must command your feelings, and leave the investigation of the affair to me. No more of this excitement, sir. You must do just what I advise, and do it promptly."

"But——"

"I cannot listen to any buts, Mr. Green," cried Boyd decisively. "First of all, telephone again to Mrs. Gregson, and command her to suppress all of the facts until I arrive at her house. I presently will go over there. Tell her to give no publicity to the case, mind you, and not to inform the local police of any of the circumstances. If I am not mistaken—ah, yonder is a party I have been expecting! To the telephone, Mr. Green, and see that my instructions are rigidly followed. I'll return in just a moment."

Boyd was not a man to be resisted at such a time. Through the glass panels of the office doors he suddenly had observed, in the public corridor outside, the same young man about whom he had questioned Gregson nearly a month before. Leaving Green to carry out his instructions, Boyd hastened out to the corridor, where Finley then was gazing anxiously toward the banker's office. Strange to relate, the last sign of auster-

ity had vanished from Felix Boyd's face, and it now wore an inviting smile.

"Ah, you're just the chap I've been looking for," he cried heartily, as he emerged to the corridor. "Your name is Finley, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," admitted Finley, apparently somewhat startled. "What do you want? Has anything happened to—to Mr. Gregson? I have been looking——"

"Been looking after him for some time—yes, yes, I know all about that, Mr. Finley," Boyd quickly interrupted, in accents of hearty approval. "Gregson told me all about you nearly a month ago. I'm mightily glad to see you at just this time. I've even been to your detective bureau, in the hope of finding you there. I saw Mr. Vogle, who speaks very highly of you. Yes, yes, something has happened to Gregson, and you are the one man from whom I hope to get some sort of a clue."

"But what has happened—what has happened?" Finley now hurriedly inquired. "Did you really go to the detective bureau after me? I am employed there only at odd times, sir, and it's three months since I did any work for them. What has happened to Mr. Gregson?"

The several questions were glibly asked, and with a display of nervous anxiety that ordinarily would have passed for genuine; yet a certain crafty and treacherous light in the depths of Finley's eyes, despite the general frankness of his youthful face, did not escape the keen discernment of Felix Boyd. With remarkable cordiality on his part, however, Boyd nodded attentively and hastened to reply, with voice confidentially lowered:

"There's the devil to pay here. Gregson is missing—mysteriously missing. There's a possibility that he was drowned last night. He went to his boat-house to go rowing——"

"Boat-house—hasn't he been seen since?" interrupted Finley, with a gasp as of one struck with sudden dismay.

"Not hide nor hair of him!" cried Boyd. "He either is a victim of foul play, or some accident has befallen him which——"

"'Twas no accident, my word for it!" Finley now exclaimed excitedly. "By Jove! I knew I was right! It comes of what the two men said to him. I saw them, sir,

all three of them on the boat-house float. If Gregson cannot be found, sir, he has committed suicide."

"Suicide—why do you say that?" demanded Boyd, with a subtle flash of his keen, gray eyes. "Here, come with me into Green's office. I'm glad; indeed, to have found you. I hoped, since you have been sort of watching Gregson, that you now could give me some clue to his absence. I am Boyd—Felix Boyd—do you know me by name?"

"Can't say that I do, sir."

"Never mind—I'm in your own line. Come this way. Here, Green, this young man may give us a pointer. Finley's his name. Been employed in a way by Gregson—never mind how just now. Have you telephoned to Mrs. Gregson?"

"Yes, and gave her your instructions."

"Good enough. Now, Finley, dear fellow, pray be brief. Why do you think Gregson committed suicide? With whom did you see him on the boat-house float? Tell us the whole business, like a good fellow, will you?"

Only a clairvoyant could have seen through Boyd's display of cordiality and eagerness, and detected any distrust of the man addressed. He had led Finley into Green's private office while speaking, and the young man, evidently none set back by the situation in which he suddenly found himself, now explained the occasion of his remarks.

III.

"Perhaps, sir," said Finley, "I first ought to state why I have been watching Mr. Gregson, which led to my seeing what occurred last evening."

"No, no, never mind that," interposed Boyd hurriedly. "I know all about that, Finley, from Gregson himself. You were long of Traction, and felt a bit anxious about him, so took to looking after him. He discovered it, and employed you to continue. Capital idea, too. A man of his financial importance just now might have enemies who would seize upon any chance to turn him down. Cut out everything needless, Finley, and give

me the bare facts. Did you follow Gregson to Ravenswood last evening?"

"Yes, sir, I did," cried Finley, plainly moved by the spirit Boyd imparted. "I have done so every day for a month, to make sure he reached home safely, and I generally have been near-by, or at one of the ferries, when he came to town in the morning."

"And what occurred last evening?"

"Twas like this, sir: Usually after seeing him safely home, I have returned to town. Last evening, however, just after seeing him enter his house, I discovered two men loafing on the corner below. They appeared to be watching Gregson's house, and I did not fancy their looks, so I hid back of a wall and watched them."

"Good for you, Finley. What followed?"

"After half-an-hour or so," added Finley glibly, "both men crossed the park near Gregson's house, and stole cautiously down to his boat-house on the bank of the river."

"Aha!" exclaimed Boyd. "Plainly they knew where and when they could catch him alone. They previously had been watching him."

"That was just my idea, sir," declared Finley, as if pleased with Boyd's approval. "First I thought I ought to inform Mr. Gregson, but before I could make up my mind to do so I saw him leave his house by the rear door and hasten down to the boat-house. I then was at some distance, so could not speak to him."

"I see," nodded Boyd. "Go on."

"I then feared that some violence might be intended, the boat-house being quite removed from the dwelling and nearly hidden by the trees, so I stole through the park to a position enabling me to see what occurred."

"Capital! Continue."

"Mr. Gregson saw the two men waiting on the float, and appeared to recognize them, which rather dispelled my fears. He went down to the float, and for nearly half-an-hour the three men stood there, talking quite excitedly."

"Could you hear what each said?"

"Not a word, sir. I was too far away, and I dared *not* approach for fear of being discovered."

"What did you infer from their actions, Mr. Finley?" Boyd earnestly inquired. "Surely some sign or gesture must have suggested the nature of their altercation, if such it was."

"That's just what it appeared to be, Mr. Boyd," cried Finley, blind to the keen gleam in Boyd's searching eyes. "Mr. Gregson, moreover, appeared greatly distressed by what was said to him. Several times he covered his face with his hands, and twice he pointed wildly to the river, as if he intimated that suicide, at least, was left him, to which he would resort if they persisted in——"

"Oh, my God!" groaned Green, who was listening in ghastly dismay. "It can't be possible that——"

"Hush!" commanded Boyd impatiently. "Hear all that Mr. Finley can impart. By Jove! young man; it's dead lucky you turned up here at just this time. I felt sure that you could help us out. Go on, I beg of you. What followed?"

"After nearly half-an-hour," Finley hastened to continue, "their discussion ended, and the two men departed. I hardly knew what to do about it. I waited briefly, and saw Mr. Gregson launch his boat and start out rowing on the river. Then I decided that he was not so badly off as I had feared.

"Naturally enough, Mr. Finley, I am sure."

"Yet I was not entirely satisfied, Mr. Boyd," added Finley, with an unconscious betrayal of eagerness. "So I decided that I would follow the two men for a time, lest they should return later and waylay Gregson, and I went even so far as to shadow them to Astoria."

"Good again, Finley!" Boyd now exclaimed, with a rare exhibition of approval. "Really you're a man fit for the central office. Did you learn anything definite about Gregson's two visitors? Do you know who they are, or where they finally went?"

"I learned nothing about them, Mr. Boyd, but I easily could identify them," cried Finley. "They were rather ordinary fellows, and they went into a saloon in a low street on the water front and did not come out—that is, sir, unless they used a rear door."

"I follow you, Finley. And then?"

"Then, sir, I decided to wait until this morning, thinking that Gregson would come into town as usual. When he failed to show up at half-past nine, I began to fear that I had missed him, or that something had happened, so I came here to learn if he had arrived. Then you suddenly came out and——"

"And accosted you, eh?" interrupted Boyd, vigorously rubbing his hands. "I see—I begin to see it all. And you, Finley, have done some excellent work. You have given me a clue that is well worth having. Now one thing more, Finley, dear fellow. Can you guide me to the saloon into which the two men disappeared?"

"Easily, sir, if you really wish it," cried Finley, with a readiness by no means lost to Felix Boyd.

"But what's to be done—my God! what's to be done?" Green now demanded, well-nigh in tears. "I cannot believe that Gregson has done away with himself. He can have had no occasion. Surely something else must have befallen him. There is a mystery here not explained in that way. Heaven help me, Boyd, what am I to do? It is nearly ten o'clock, when the stock market will open. If Gregson is not on the floor as usual——"

"Northern Traction will fall with a crash, eh?" Boyd sharply interrupted.

"With a crash—God above, even that does not express it!" groaned Green, wildly wringing his hands. "I cannot begin to tell you. Vital interests are frightfully at stake. Gregson alone knows all the ins and outs of this Traction deal, and he alone held the helm and was running the thing. His death at just this time would be a financial calamity. Even the rumor of it will precipitate a panic, and bring ruin upon us and all involved with us in this business. Ruin stares——"

"Stop right there, Mr. Green!" Boyd sternly interrupted, bringing his clenched hand down upon the table. "There shall be neither rumors nor ruin this morning."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say, sir! This is a crisis in which you must display all your strength and manhood. You must fill Gregson's shoes this morning, let the cost be what it may."

"Impossible!"

"It is not impossible—it is imperative!" thundered Boyd, with passionate vehemence. "I must have a few hours in which to accomplish my work, and there is no other way. You must go into the market in Gregson's place. You must report Gregson merely away on business. You must refute every rumor and deny every allegation. You must peg Northern Traction at its present level, and hold it there, though you exhaust the resources of every banker identified with its interests."

"But——"

"There are no buts about it, sir! The situation admits of no alternative," roared Boyd, leaping to his feet. "My reputation is as seriously at stake as is the fate of Northern Traction. Mark me! you must do what I command—and do it promptly! You must peg Northern Traction and hold it! In return—mark me, Mr. Green, before the market closes I will have Gregson on the floor of the Exchange!"

The declaration was a startling one. It rang from Boyd's lips with a violence that thrilled every nerve of his hearers. He stood with his clenched hand uplifted, with his impassioned face sternly drawn and determined, and his thin lips quivering like those of a thoroughbred in the heat of a race. Yet his glowing eyes did not lose the momentary change that swept over Finley's features, the look of a man indescribably amazed and perplexed by the declaration he had heard.

As for Gregson's partner, knowing Boyd as he did, he started up like a man electrified with sudden hope.

"Good heavens, Boyd, if you can accomplish that," he cried excitedly, "I can support the stock until afternoon, surely, and prevent a panic."

"You have my word for it," cried Boyd forcibly. "Finley has given me the one clue I required. With Finley to help me, I will do just what I have stated. Look lively, then, for it's nearly ten. Do your part, Green, and I swear that I'll do mine. To the Exchange! To the Exchange—and leave all the rest to me! I'll have Gregson there before the market closes!"

As remarked before, Felix Boyd was irresistible at such a time and in such an emergency. Green demurred

no longer, but rushed out to his main office to prepare for his arduous duties of that eventful day.

Martin Finley, however, appeared quite nonplused by the unexpected turn of affairs. The color had gone from his cheeks, and his knit brows and drawn lips indicated misgivings of no uncertain character.

"Good heavens, Mr. Boyd!" he hastened to exclaim. "What do you really make of this? What clue have I given you, sir?"

"Don't ask me—not now!" cried Boyd, with feigned excitement. "Do only what I require, and without questions. You're all right, Finley, from your head down, and with you to help me I'll land Gregson on the floor of the Exchange before three o'clock. I now see the whole game—take my word for that, Finley. First of all, we must locate those two men in Astoria; and then—ah, well, the two men first! You come along with me, Finley."

The latter obeyed, like one a little disturbed by the situation, and Boyd led the way to the outer corridor.

There he abruptly halted, crying quickly:

"Wait just one moment, Finley. I have one more word of advice for Mr. Green."

Then he darted back, out of sight from the corridor, and seized a scrap of paper from one of the office desks. To write a few words upon it required but a moment, and he then hastened to rejoin Finley in the corridor.

"Now we're off!" he cried heartily. "By Jove! the turn of this trick will be a feather in your cap, Finley, as well as in mine. Come on, now, and look lively!"

Finley made no reply, but indulged in a crafty side glance at Felix Boyd's determined face. As the two men hurried from the building, Boyd dropped a crumpled wad of paper upon the sidewalk behind him, and a bearded man, loafing on the curbstone, presently picked it up and read the instructions inscribed upon it:

"Shadow me constantly. Don't interfere unless you hear my revolver. Then look lively!"

Jimmie Coleman smiled under his heavy beard, and thought he knew about what the game was, and what *was* wanted.

Yet Felix Boyd was playing a deeper game than super-

ficially appeared. He was, in fact, taking the one and only slender chance which the case presented. Yet he did not hurry his work after leaving Gregson's office. He took Finley to his own office in Pine Street, ostensibly for the purpose of questioning him more closely, and preparing himself for his next move. In reality, however, he aimed only to delay matters until after the noon editions of the newspapers had appeared.

Despite the secrecy he had imposed, he then found that nearly every paper reported the probable death of Gregson, either by accident or suicide, and also the fact that his boat had been found overturned and with oars missing, near one of the Astoria docks.

Boyd now delayed only to telephone to Mrs. Gregson, to make sure that she had disclosed none of the facts published; and he then reverted to Finley, to whom he had made plausible excuses for his delay, at the same time disclosing nothing to relieve the latter's misgivings.

"Now, Finley, we'll be off again!" he cried grimly. "The cat's out of the bag, quite as I anticipated. As I said before, Finley, my boy, I see this game from start to finish."

"Well, I'm blowed if I do, Mr. Boyd!" returned Finley, who plainly was growing more and more uneasy.

"Ah, well, I'll explain it to you after we have landed our man," cried Boyd roundly. "You doubt that I will land him, don't you, Finley? Well, well, you leave that to me! If I fail, Finley, my boy, I'll never again set foot below the dead-line. But first of all, Finley, to locate those two fellows in Astoria. You know the place, you say, and all I want is to have you show it to me."

"Well, I'll do that for you," growled Finley, as they hastened away. "Trust me to do that much!"

"So I do, Finley, my boy."

It was nearly one o'clock when they reached that part of Astoria to which Finley took his companion. It was one of the lower quarters of the town, an obscure street making toward the river, with a dismal array of inferior dwellings, shops and sheds in either direction, and little enough on any side to recommend the locality to an observer.

"*This is the street, I believe,*" remarked Finley, halt-

ing a bit doubtfully on a corner. "Yes, now I am sure it is. Yonder, where the alley makes in toward the sheds and stable back of that saloon, is where I lost the two fellows."

The place indicated was some fifty yards away, and had no inviting appearance. Boyd studied the confusion of buildings intently for a few moments, then grimly asked:

"Did the two men go into the saloon, think you, or into the alley adjoining it?"

"I can't be positive about that," muttered Finley, who now appeared noticeably pale. "They may have gone through the alley. I know only that I suddenly lost sight of them, and in that immediate locality."

"Are you sure you would know them again?"

"Oh, I'm dead sure of that, Mr. Boyd."

"Suppose we go and buy a drink in the saloon," suggested Boyd. "Possibly you might see one or both of them in there."

Finley glanced up with eyes that wavered despite him, and Boyd read them as one reads an open book.

"Wouldn't it be better," ventured Finley, "if I went there alone for a starter? Two of us might arouse some suspicion."

Boyd suppressed a smile of grim satisfaction, and answered, like one half in doubt:

"That's true. Not a bad idea. Go ahead, then, and I'll drop into that shop on the opposite corner, and buy a cigar while I wait for you. It'll serve, also, to keep me out of sight. Stay a moment! If you observe anything of importance, Finley, don't make any move before advising me."

"No, no, trust me for that," replied Finley, as he departed.

Boyd smiled faintly when he caught the parting gleam of the speaker's crafty eyes. He crossed the street and entered the shop mentioned, where he bought and lighted a cigar, then lingered to read an advertisement on one of the dingy walls.

Nearly ten minutes passed, yet Boyd patiently waited, so sure was he of his discernment and deductions. Glan-

cing from the shop window, he presently saw Coleman, still in disguise, just around the opposite corner.

At the end of the interval mentioned, the shop door was opened by a rough fellow in a truckman's garb, who glanced doubtfully about until he discovered Boyd, then quickly approached him.

"Say, sir, is your name Boyd?" he asked, in a husky, semi-subdued whisper and with a breath odorous of Santa Cruz rum and molasses.

Boyd nodded, and appeared a bit surprised and curious.

"Yes," he quietly admitted. "Why do you ask?"

"Because a covey down in a saloon below here asked me to come here after you. Said I'd know you quick enough. Said his name was Finley, and as how you'd understand."

"Why didn't he come himself?" inquired Boyd, though he already anticipated all that this artifice was designed to accomplish.

"Because he wanted to follow a covey who was just leaving the place, and who went through an alley right near it," the ruffian huskily explained. "Finley didn't want to lose sight of him, d'ye see, and so he asked me to bring you through the alley after him. I dunno what's up, but I said I'd do it if there was anything in it for me. If the game——"

"Never mind what the game is," growled Boyd abruptly. "I understand it now, and will go with you. Lead the way, for we'd best lose no time."

"No danger o' cops, is there?" queried the fellow suspiciously, as they left the shop together. "If there is, cut me out of the——"

"No, no, nothing of the sort," cried Boyd curtly. "Lead the way and look lively."

"I can do that all right," nodded the other, with a leer at Boyd's stern face. "I know every crook and turn through yonder barracks—leastwise I ought to!"

"Good enough! Through the alley, did you say?"

"Aye, this way!"

He gripped Boyd's arm and drew him into a narrow passage between the buildings, at the same time glancing back the way they had come. Only one person was in sight—a bearded man, apparently half drunk, staggering.

with hands thrust deep in his pockets, along the narrow sidewalk.

"Get a move on," muttered Boyd impatiently. "Did Finley go this way? If so, we have no time to waste."

"Aye, he did. I'll show you."

The speaker plunged into the alley, with Boyd close at his heels, and led the way through to a stable yard. With a quick move, unobserved, Boyd slipped his revolver into the side pocket of his coat.

"He must have come this way," muttered the ruffian, over his shoulder. "Mebbe they've gone through the stable and sheds, if he followed the covey."

"If he did, I must find him," Boyd impatiently rejoined. "Go ahead, if you know the way. I'll follow."

"Aye, I know it."

The ruffian crossed the foul yard, and pushed open the door of the stable, into which he hurriedly plunged, with Boyd close behind him. The place was damp and lighted only dimly, and the fellow paused to mutter huskily:

"They're not here. There's a shed and alley out back. They must have gone that way. Shall we follow 'em?"

"Yes, yes, go on!"

Boyd followed for a step or two—then heard the stable door close with a crash behind him. Like a flash, he wheeled sharp about, only to quickly dodge the arms and blows of three others, Finley among them, who had sprung from obscure corners of the dismal stable.

"Nail him! Nail him, you fools!" Finley fiercely cried, as Boyd leaped aside and brought his shoulders to one of the walls. "If he——"

But there his voice was drowned by the ringing report of Boyd's revolver, and one of the gang, who had sprung nearer with a bludgeon, went to the floor with his wrist fractured by the bullet.

Above the cries of pain and rage that followed, the voice of Boyd rang out like a trumpet.

"So, so, Finley, this was your game, eh! Not a move from you fellows, or—— Ah, Jimmie, you're just in time! Close in and cover these fellows, every man of *them*! Not one must escape us! Hark you, Finley, *drop that gun*, or I'll let daylight into you!"

This sudden turn of the situation, although obviously

anticipated by Felix Boyd, utterly nonplused his dismayed and startled assailants. Having closely followed Boyd from the street, Jimmie Coleman had thrown open the stable door a moment after the fracas began, and appeared with drawn revolvers upon the stirring scene. It was a situation obviously so well in hand, moreover, that only Finley offered brief resistance; though he, too, speedily dropped his weapon when confronted by the threatening muzzle of that in the hand of Felix Boyd.

"Just as you say, Mr. Boyd," he sneered bitterly, as he complied. "Plainly enough you have been a bit too clever for me, and I reckon the game is up."

"It is by no means ended, Finley, you scamp, until you reveal the whereabouts of Thomas Gregson," cried Boyd sternly. "Out with it at once, or——"

But there a groan from the stable loft cut short his threat—and it told the whole story.

It then was precisely half-past one.

The newspaper reports of Gregson's death had reached the Stock Exchange nearly two hours earlier, and with an effect hardly to be imagined. Northern Traction was set swaying like a reed in a gale, now up, now down, vacillating wildly in the nineties. There, true to his promise, Green had pegged the stock and held it, though he fast was exhausting millions in the operation.

At half-past two, Green was like a man in a maelstrom of opposing forces. Under the leadership of one Jack Pollock, of Burton & Pollock, the big bear pool was getting in its work with the ferocity of beasts in a pit, viciously resolved to break the price of Northern Traction before the closing of the market.

It was, indeed, the most critical hour of the day. The Exchange was in a constant uproar. Brokers were fighting like madmen at and around the Northern Traction standard. At times Green was swept from his feet by the turbulent multitude around him, who appeared bent upon crushing him at any cost. And on one of these occasions, only one, at precisely a quarter before three, the stock broke ninety—and shrieks of exultation followed the break.

Then came one of the most startling and dramatic scenes ever witnessed in this theater of tragic events. 11

would not have seemed as if the entrance of one man at such a moment would even have been noticed. Yet only one man, as white as the linen at his throat, but with features wearing an expression no observer ever forgot, suddenly rushed in upon the floor of the Exchange.

The man was Gregson!

And then the name of Gregson rose from a thousand throats, with a volume of sound that shook the mighty building from roof to foundations.

One man only, suddenly observing him, shrank as if he unexpectedly beheld a ghost—the leader of the bear pool, Jack Pollock.

In thirty seconds Northern Traction had leaped to par—and the closing came at one hundred and eight.

Gregson & Green had won out—or, rather, Mr. Felix Boyd.

IV.

Boyd smiled rather grimly through a wreath of pipe smoke, and elevated his heels to his office table.

"The case has a darker side than appears on the surface, and the worst of it is, Jimmie, we have no grip on the chief culprits," said he.

"I'm blessed if I quite see through the affair," replied Coleman, who was seated opposite. "What have you really made of it from the start?"

"Humph!" grunted Boyd. "It became plain enough in a way, Jimmie, when I learned of Gregson's mysterious disappearance. As I was saying at that time this morning, I believe, Jack Pollock is capable of any kind of a dirty move that would enable him to make a profitable turn in the market."

"The dickens!" exclaimed Coleman. "You don't think he was back of this, do you?"

"Indeed, I do, Jimmie."

"But such a move would kill him in the Exchange."

"Ah, but he has cleverly covered his tracks, Jimmie, and so have his chief confederates," replied Boyd pointedly.

"But how did you ferret out the truth and locate *Gregson* so quickly?"

Boyd laughed lightly and tossed his head.

"First, I found Finley, nearly a month ago, constantly shadowing Gregson. He explained his conduct in a way satisfactory to Gregson, but it did not wash with me. Yet I could detect no game just at that time, so I let the affair take its course."

"I see."

"Last night Gregson suddenly disappeared, just at a time when his absence, and particularly a report of his death, would most seriously affect his interests in the stock market."

"Oh, ho, that's true!" laughed Coleman. "I ought to have thought of that."

"Now follow me, Jimmie," smiled Boyd. "I'll show you the simplicity of my deductions."

"Let her go, Felix."

"First, the unusual conduct of Finley, and then Gregson's strange disappearance. The former at once eliminated the probability of Gregson's death by accident or suicide, and left only the probability that he had been abducted. Next came the question—Who would benefit most by such a crime? Naturally, Jimmie, the big bear pool in the stock market."

"Clear as a crystal, surely."

"So I decided upon the theory of abduction. Then I asked myself how it was accomplished. Plainly enough, dear fellow, Finley had made himself solid with Gregson for only one reason—that he might safely study his habits, and easily succeed in getting hands upon him at the most critical market period. So, when Gregson went to his boat-house as usual yesterday afternoon, he found it occupied by the three ruffians, who quickly sent him down and out, and after dark removed him to Astoria in his own boat, and then imprisoned him where we found him."

"Plain enough, Felix. So Finley's story of that interview on the float was all a lie, eh?"

"Out of whole cloth, Jimmie, and told with a design to create the impression that Gregson had committed suicide," nodded Boyd. "I suspected this work on Finley's part at once. A visit to the detective bureau convinced me that I was right. Yet the fellows there have cut them-

selves free from this affair by denying that Finley is one of their regular men. When I left there, however, I heard their telephone bell, and I decided that Finley was being warned that I suspected him. Yet that was precisely what I wanted."

"Wanted Finley to think you suspected him!" cried Coleman. "Why the dickens did you want that?"

"Because I knew that Finley then would become alarmed, and decide that I, too, ought to be put down and out for a time," laughed Boyd. "Then I easily reasoned that he, in order to accomplish it, would lead me to the lair of his confederates, and probably to Gregson's place of imprisonment, providing I gave him any opportunity to do so. You may wager your pile, Jimmie, that I very craftily gave him the opportunity—and you have seen the results."

"Indeed, I have!" exclaimed Coleman, laughing deeply. "By Jove! Boyd, you work out your successes through most extraordinary methods. Gregson ought to reward you liberally."

"Gregson is all right, I am confident of that, also of his deal with Northern Traction," smiled Boyd. "He'll win out at the finish, there's no doubt of that. I regret only one thing, Jimmie."

"What is that, Felix?"

"That I cannot get my grip on the chief culprits. I'd wager my year's salary, Jimmie, that Pollock played this game through that detective bureau, and that they in turn shouldered upon Finley the peril of the knavery."

"It certainly looks so."

"Still, Jimmie, what's the use of repining?" laughed Boyd, laying aside his pipe. "It's a long lane that has no turning, you know. I have an idea that some day, Jimmie, I shall expose the whole truth about this affair, and probably land the chief knaves responsible for Gregson's abduction. Had your dinner, Jimmie? No? Come and have it with me, dear fellow."

The Case of the Under-secretary.

I.

"Yes, Jimmie, it's nip and tuck all the time, day in and day out, from one year's end to the other. There's no let up."

Jimmie Coleman laughed, and Mr. Felix Boyd elevated his heels to the edge of his office desk and roundly added, through the bluish spirals curling upward from his pipe's bowl:

"A neck-and-neck race all the time, Jimmie—that's what it is. Now the criminal has the pole, and looks for all the world like a sure winner; and now his one persistent and tireless adversary, the professional sleuth, wrests it from him, and shows to the front for a spell. But the advantage in either case is always temporary, and the strenuous struggle never ends."

"And it never will, Felix," grimly declared the central office man.

"Possibly not."

"While there are dollars to be more easily made by knavery and cunning than by honest, hard labor, society will continue to breed criminals," continued Coleman. "And, while criminals continue to exist and ply their vicious trade, the professional detective must also remain in the field. We hunters of men are a social necessity."

"That's very true, Jimmie. The field is a broad one, moreover, and is constantly enlarging. Has that ever occurred to you?"

"Well, I cannot say that it has. I seldom bother with anything but the practical side of my infernal vocation."

Boyd laughed softly, in his semi-quizzical fashion, and for a moment nodded thoughtfully at his companion.

"Look the field over, Jimmie," said he. "Once we had only the criminal, with his jimmy; the footpad, with his

pistol or bludgeon; the sneak-thief, with his sly dexterity; the forger, with his supple fingers and crafty pen. The time has been, Jimmie, when these comprised the chief quarry for policemen and detectives."

"That's right, too," admitted Coleman.

"What a difference in these days!" continued Boyd, in musing vein. "The category now outreaches one's imagination, even. Pelion is heaped upon Ossa. Each new day brings forth some new phase of crime, some novel and original scheme by which knaves aim to get the best of honest men. With the growth of population, with broader social and business conditions, have come greater opportunities for crime—and the criminal invariably keeps abreast of his opportunities."

"And the sleuth must keep abreast of the criminal, eh?" laughed Coleman.

"That's just the size of it, Jimmie," smiled Felix Boyd. "Therefore, as I remarked in the beginning, it is a neck-and-neck race, Jimmie, from one year's end to the other. It would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer, say nothing of an addle-pated detective, to anticipate the next criminal scheme for rifling the almighty dollar from some poor devil, at the expense of—— Hello! Somebody coming? Possibly we are to be confronted with the problem even now."

And Boyd gazed expectantly toward his office door.

Rapid steps were sounding in the adjoining corridor, and presently the door was unceremoniously opened, and a well-known Wall Street banker hurriedly entered.

"Ah, Boyd, how lucky!" he exclaimed.

"Lucky that you find me, Mr. Belden?"

"Exactly. I want you to do me a favor."

"You are on my list of patrons, Belden. "What's the trouble?"

"A devil's own mess, I fear. You know the Honorable Cyril Dearborn?"

"The English consul-general?"

"Yes, certainly. He is a perfect gentleman in every way, very wealthy and accomplished, and we are very warm friends. If you can help him out——"

"One moment, Belden," interrupted Boyd. "Suppose you come to the point at once, and tell me what has hap-

pened to Dearborn. Time may be worth something, you know."

"You are right," Belden hurriedly rejoined. "In fact, Boyd, nothing has happened to Dearborn himself. But his daughter, Luella Dearborn, is mysteriously missing—lost—abducted—the devil knows what!"

"State all of the circumstances," said Boyd, with a subtle glow beginning to show in the depths of his keen, gray eyes.

Instead of complying, however, the banker impatiently cried:

"First come with me to Dearborn's office, which adjoins my own. That's how I became so quickly informed of the misfortune. I'll give you the particulars on the way. The consul is nearly distracted. Only with difficulty could I persuade him to defer an appeal to the police and first allow me to consult you. Come, come, Boyd! Something must be done, and done quickly."

Boyd did not express his secret wish that Belden had suffered the consul to give the case to the police, the kidnapping of a young girl not being at all to his fancy, nor in any way suggestive of the work of that obscure gang of criminals so long operating below the dead-line. The discovery and arrest of whom had become one of Felix Boyd's chief aspirations.

He arose to comply with Belden's urgent request, however, and deferred their departure only to say quietly to the central office man:

"Meet me at Belden's office in the course of a quarter hour, Jimmie. I'll look into this affair. If it amounts to anything I may require your aid."

Coleman merely nodded his assent, and Boyd slipped into his street coat and accompanied the impatient banker.

"What I know of the case, Boyd, may be briefly stated," said Belden, as they hurried through Pine Street. "Cyril Dearborn, who is a very capable and wealthy man, has been the English consul-general here for nearly a year. He is a recognized authority on international law, and his passion for Blackstone, rather than any mercenary motive, actuated him in accepting his honorable and important office."

"What about the case itself?" inquired Boyd bluntly.

"It appears that Dearborn's daughter, who is an only child, and he a widower, was left with her aunt in England when Dearborn came over here. He recently decided, however, that he would send for her, both to have her near him and in order that she might take a supplementary education course at Vassar."

"I saw an item in the newspapers to that effect, I think."

"Yes; it was very generally published."

"Go on."

"So the consul sent for her to come over here. She arrived this morning on the *Umbria*, having made the voyage with London friends, who also were traveling this way. Now, however, she is not to be found."

"Not to be found!" echoed Boyd.

"Not hide nor hair of her," cried Belden, with more fervor than elegance.

"Perhaps she has gone away with her friends."

"Not so. They left the steamer half-an-hour after she did. Dearborn learned that from one of the vessel's officers."

"Then she may have lost her way, or——"

"No, no—as you'll presently see," interrupted Belden. "Here we are at Dearborn's office. He will explain more fully than I can."

He led the way into the consul's attractive rooms, from an inner one of which a tall, aristocratic-looking man in middle life hurriedly emerged, obviously in a state of excitement and distress not to be repressed, even in the presence of his secretary and several clerks occupying the outer office.

"Thank God, Belden, you have returned!" he cried, as he approached. "Is this your friend Mr. Boyd?"

"Yes, Dearborn. Allow me to——"

"Oh, don't delay for introductions," cried the Englishman, nevertheless shaking Boyd warmly by the hand. "The fact is, Mr. Boyd, I am in a state of distraction which——"

"Which is, under the circumstances, the worst possible *state you can get into*," interposed Boyd, with effective *quietude*. "So calm yourself, Mr. Dearborn, and briefly

tell me all that you know about this case. Then I will look into it at once."

"A thousand thanks," replied Dearborn, with a nervous display of appreciation. "The facts are these: My daughter arrived this morning on the *Umbria*. I was expecting to meet her at the pier, but was informed late last night by one of the company's clerks, to whom I telephoned regarding the hour of her arrival, that the steamer was detained in the outer harbor by a dense fog, and would not make the pier before noon to-day."

"Go on, sir; I follow you."

"Therefore, as I had very important business in court this morning, I did not hasten to my office, and it was nearly eleven o'clock when I arrived here. I at once telephoned to learn if the *Umbria* would soon be docked, and was told that she had reached her pier soon after nine o'clock."

"Ah! I see."

"I then hastened to the pier, Mr. Boyd, only to find that my daughter, as well as the friends with whom she had made the voyage, had left the steamer some time before. I soon learned, however, that they had not departed in company, but that Luella had left with a man who had boarded the steamer in search of her."

"Who told you that?" demanded Boyd, with brows beginning to knit.

"An officer stationed at the gangway. He stated that a gentleman had asked leave to come on board, in order to bring off a lady passenger who had no escort, and his request was granted. Soon after, the same man left the steamer with my daughter."

"Did the gangway officer see them?"

"Yes."

"And recognized your daughter?"

"Yes. He is attached to the steamer, and is positive that the girl was Luella."

"Did you get a description of her companion?"

"The officer stated that he was a well-dressed, dark-eyed man of about thirty-five, with a mustache and short, pointed beard. Also that he appeared very gentlemanly, and betrayed no perturbation natural to one engaged in evil."

"Humph!" ejaculated Boyd contemptuously. "Such signs don't amount to much in cases in which nerve is the chief requisite. Mr. Dearborn, this affair certainly has a serious side. You already have, I take it, given me about all the information you possess bearing upon it."

"I think so, Mr. Boyd. Yet——"

"Pardon me," Boyd quietly interposed. "First answer a few questions for me."

"As many as you wish."

"How old is your daughter?"

"Nineteen."

"Do you know whether her trunks are still at the pier?"

"They are. I looked them up and saw them there."

"At what time was the *Umbria* docked?"

"Soon after nine o'clock."

"And at what time did you reach the pier?"

"Just before eleven."

"Allowing for the ordinary confusion and delays, then, it is safe to assume that this outrage, if such it proves to be, was planned and executed within an hour," said Boyd, more earnestly. "Now answer me with care, Mr. Dearborn."

"Surely, sir."

"Was it generally reported in the newspapers of yesterday that your daughter was expected to arrive on the *Umbria*?"

"Yes, sir, it was," bowed Dearborn. "Unfortunately, perhaps, I have been given some social prominence here, and the fact of my daughter's coming was widely noticed by the press."

"Has any stranger called here this morning to see you?"

"I think not."

"Inquire of your clerks, Mr. Dearborn; and also whether any questions relating to your whereabouts have been asked by telephone."

The English consul hastened to comply. Then it was learned that some unknown person had inquired by telephone about ten o'clock, to learn whether Mr. Dearborn was then in his office. When informed that he was in court, and had not arrived at his office, the stranger had

answered merely that he would ring him up a little later. The identity of the questioner could not be ascertained.

As the deduction obviously made by Felix Boyd may suggest, however, his mind was vigorously at work on the case, and his forceful countenance evinced his quickened interest.

"There is no time to be lost, Mr. Dearborn," he abruptly declared. "The evidence indicates that your daughter has been very carefully abducted, and the boldness and cunning employed in perpetrating the outrage point to a certain coterie of knaves not entirely strangers to me. I will get after them at once, and do my best to discover your daughter as quickly as possible."

"The police——"

"No police at present, if you please, nor any publicity," Boyd quickly interrupted, in a way not wisely to have been ignored. "First let me get in my own work, and if it proves futile, you then may appeal to others. On no other condition will I proceed with the case."

"Try him, Dearborn, by all means," cried Belden, when the Englishman hesitated. "You do not know Boyd as we of the Street know him. Try him, Dearborn, by all means."

Dearborn now signified his assent with a gesture, and Boyd then hastened to ask:

"Who are the friends with whom your daughter made the voyage from England?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Kendall, of London."

"Do you know where they may be found?"

"Presumably at one of the hotels—probably the Waldorf."

"Ring up the Waldorf at once, then, and ask if they are registered there," cried Boyd.

"Yes, Mr. Boyd, they are," Dearborn excitedly reported, a little later. "Do you wish to talk with them?"

"Yes, and to see them," said Boyd bluntly. "Give me one of your cards. That's all, sir. Do nothing more on the case—absolutely nothing—till you hear from me. That shall be as early as possible. Now, sir, I'm off for the Waldorf. Don't delay me, gentlemen, for each moment may be of value."

With which, disregarding the questions Dearborn was fain to ask, Mr. Felix Boyd hastened from the consul-general's office and into that of the banker, from which he quickly beckoned the central office man there awaiting him.

"There's nothing yet doing for you, Jimmie," he hurriedly remarked, as they proceeded to the street. "But I feel sure that I shall need you later."

"Say when, Felix," laughed Coleman. "That's all that's necessary."

"Got anything on?"

"Nothing important."

"Will it bore you very much to wait in my office until I show up?"

"Not in the least."

"Go there, then, and wait till I come. It may be soon, or possibly not for several hours."

"I'll be there when you come."

"Do so. I anticipate a bit of warm work, provided I can follow the thread I've got hold of, and haste may be imperative. So don't disappoint me, Jimmie."

"Not I, Felix!"

"So long, then. I'll surely see you later."

II.

In the circumstantial evidence bearing upon the disappearance or abduction of Luella Dearborn, as just presented, one would hardly say that Mr. Felix Boyd could have discovered anything of serious importance. Very few men, indeed, would have regarded with more than superficial consideration the simple circumstances brought to his notice; and it is doubtful if any man on earth, save Boyd alone, would have discovered in them anything of a very encouraging nature.

Boyd seldom moved out of a walk, however, unless stimulated in some extraordinary way; and the celerity with which he arrived at the Waldorf, after leaving Dearborn's office, was alone significant.

High noon found him just entering the apartments of *Mr. and Mrs. Kendall*, to whom he presented the consul's

card and introduced himself, then hastened to state his business.

"It's about Miss Dearborn," said he, while making a cursory survey of the English couple. "She has——"

"Been abducted? Oh, yes; we have just heard of it, and are in great distress about her," Mrs. Kendall impulsively interrupted, with much agitation.

"Heard of it, eh?" rejoined Boyd, with a curious squint. "May I ask, if you please, who was your informant?"

"Why, sir, Mr. Dearborn himself," replied the lady. "Joe—that's Mr. Kendall—just had a talk with him by telephone, and was informed of the dreadful news."

"Mr. Dearborn, if you will pardon me, would do better if he kept the affair quiet," said Boyd, a bit dryly. "It is barely possible that I may, by speedily recovering the girl, be able to spare him and her the unpleasant notoriety attending the general publication of such an affair. I by no means imply, however, that you and Mr. Kendall will not maintain a generous secrecy," he smilingly added, with much suavity.

"Oh, we will disclose nothing, I assure you," cried Kendall warmly. "Dearborn is our very dear friend. If we can be of any service, moreover, I hope you will command us."

"As I now am investigating the affair," returned Boyd, "you may answer a few questions for me, if you will."

"Cheerfully."

"Was Miss Dearborn with you when the *Umbria* arrived at the pier?"

"She was, Mr. Boyd, and remained with us until she departed with her father's secretary."

"With his secretary?" queried Boyd, with lifted brows.

"Certainly, sir, or so the gentleman stated. He came on board soon after ten o'clock, and, having found Luella, he stated that her father had a very important case in court this morning, and could not come to the steamer. He introduced himself as Dearborn's under-secretary, and said that he had been sent from the consul's office to escort the girl to her father's residence."

"Did she readily accompany him?"

"Immediately," bowed Kendall. "Naturally none of us had any reason to distrust the man."

"Had she any baggage other than her trunks?"

"She had quite a large portmanteau, made of brown leather. Of this the under-secretary politely relieved her, when they started to leave the steamer."

"Did you see them after they disembarked?"

"We did not. They disappeared under the shed on the pier."

"On what part of the vessel were you located when she was made fast to the pier?"

"We were seated on the after-deck, sir, watching for Mr. Dearborn, who we expected would meet Luella at the steamer."

"How long did you remain there after the vessel was docked?"

"About half-an-hour, I should say."

"Were you in plain view from the pier?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, very much," smiled Boyd, rising to go. "Now I will trouble you only for a general description of—well, I will call him—the under-secretary."

Kendall laughed, and hastened to add the desired description, whereupon Mr. Felix Boyd made a hurried departure, and let no grass grow under his feet in returning down-town.

Between twelve-thirty and three that afternoon, Boyd located and interviewed no less than seventy-two public hackmen, delaying to ask of each only such questions as evoked replies indicating that he was not the man Boyd sought.

Not until he struck hackman seventy-three, at the foot of Warren Street, did Boyd light upon his man. Once again, however, it is doubtful if another than Boyd would have derived much satisfaction from the perfectly frank statements of the hackman, or have been at all elated at having discovered him.

Hackman seventy-three was an Irishman named Casey, with red hair, and a short, croppy beard of the same roseate hue. He had ruddy cheeks, a pair of shrewd, gray eyes, and in years and build was about on a line *with Boyd himself.*

At a gesture from the latter Casey readily came down from his box, when the following brief interview ensued, the acumen displayed by Felix Boyd placing him in a class entirely his own:

"Is this a public carriage, my man?" he asked.

"Sure, sor, it is," replied Casey, with an unctuous brogue.

"Have you been out with it since morning?"

"I have, sor, save whin baiting up a bit."

"Were you at the Jane Street pier when the *Umbria* was docked this morning?"

"That's where I was, sor."

"Did you secure any passengers?"

"I did."

"How many?"

"Why will I be after telling you?" inquired Casey, with a suspicious squint of his gray eyes.

"I am a detective, Mr. Casey," said Boyd, with quiet significance. "Answer me truthfully, my man, or you may find yourself without a license."

"Sure, sor, that's what I'll do in that case," laughed Casey. "I took away two gintlemin, sor, up to No. — Thirty-first Street. I always kape a ricord, sor, so I'm sure of the street and number."

"Were your passengers two men only? No women?"

"Divil a woman, sor. Just two min."

"Did they arrive on the steamer?"

"Bedad, sor, I can't say. I'm thinking wan of them did."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I didn't see him anywhere about whin the first wan engaged me," explained Casey, in a rather circuitous fashion. "Me hack was a bit away from the pier, sor, and wan of thim engaged me for the job, and said he was after having a friend who would be along prisently. We waited about a bit, and thin he asked me would I go and get him some cigars, as he was near dead for a smoke."

"Did you go?" inquired Boyd, with a subtle gleam in his attentive eyes.

"Sure I did!" exclaimed Casey, pulling out a cigar.

"There's wan he gave me for the going, the which I'm kaping to smoke whin I rade me avening paper."

"And when you returned with the cigars, Mr. Casey? What then?"

"Whin I came back to me hack with thim, the wan who sint me said his friend was inside, and I was to start at once. So I got upon me box and started. That's all, sor."

"Not quite all, Mr. Casey," said Boyd, with a rather grim display of satisfaction. "Did you see the second man, the friend of number one?"

"I did not, indade."

"How did that happen?"

"The first wan had drawn down the curtain on the hack dure, sor."

"He had, eh?"

"He said his friend was after having wake eyes, which the light hurted; and thin he got in and closed the hack, while I was after mounting to me box."

"Ah, I see," muttered Boyd. "Did they have any baggage?"

"Divil a piece, sor."

"Not even a grip, or a portmanteau?"

"Not wan, sor, sure."

"Was the man you saw young or old?"

"Middlin' like, he was, with a smooth face. Sure, sor, he looked all right, so he did."

"Smooth face, eh?" Boyd thoughtfully murmured to himself. "What happened, Casey, when you arrived at the house in Thirty-first Street?"

"Sure, sor, nothing at all," vouchsafed Mr. Casey.

"Your passengers got out of the hack, didn't they?"

"Faith, they'd be like to do that," laughed Casey, with a toss of his red head. "Whin I got down from me box, the wan I saw at the pier was on the sidewalk as quick as I was meself."

"Ah! And then?"

"He said there was a trunk upstairs in the house, which he wanted me to take away whin I wint, and I've it at the Grand Central Station."

"Well?"

"So I wint up the steps with him and into the house,

and he sint me up to the third flure front, saying he'd bring in his friend while I was after getting the trunk."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"But divil a trunk could I find in the third flure front," added Casey, with ludicrous simplicity; "and whin I came down, I was told an expressman had called and got it while the boss, the wan I spake of, was out after his friend at the steamer."

"While you were after the trunk," remarked Boyd, "your passenger with weak eyes had, I presume, been assisted into the house."

"Sure, sor, he had," cried Casey. "And niver an eye did I set on him. I was paid for me job, all right, and that's all there was to it. I'd go me pile on that, sor."

"And lose your pile, Casey, in the bargain," said Boyd, with caustic dryness. "I want you, Casey. Take me up to Pine Street at once, and don't spare your horses. Here's my card."

Casey glanced curiously at the name on the slip of pasteboard, and then his honest, gray eyes came up with an utterly indescribable stare at the forceful, clean-cut features of Mr. Felix Boyd.

"'Fore God, is that so?" he muttered, quite aghast with amazement. "Phat the divil, thin, was I up against this morning?"

Jimmie Coleman looked somewhat surprised on seeing Felix Boyd, when the latter entered his Pine Street office in company with the hackman. Boyd's strong, clean-cut features appeared drawn and pale, his eyes feverish and dilated, and he at once turned to the lavatory and drained several full glasses of cold water, one after another.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Coleman, curiously regarding him. "Are you on fire inside?"

Boyd smiled faintly, and signed Casey to a chair.

"Not exactly, Jimmie," said he, a bit hoarsely. "Empty as a tub would hit it nearer. I've eaten nothing since early morning. Haven't had time as yet."

"Same case?"

"Yes."

"Struck anything?"

"A thread worth following, I think. At all events, I

shall try it. Ring up the central office, Jimmie, and bring three men down here as quickly as you—or, stay! Take this address, instead, and go up there, and—what is this house, Casey? Is it one of a block?"

"It is, sor. It's wan of a rid brick block, about the thirud dure from the corner."

"Here you are, Jimmie. Take two or three men along with you, and cover that house front and rear. Have all hands lie low for a time, or until signaled from within. Let the sound of a gun bring them in on the jump. It'll not be that, unless necessary. Place them within an hour, Jimmie, when I shall show up there as——"

Boyd, who had been hurriedly removing his outer garments while rattling forth the above instructions, finished with a cant of his head in the direction of the waiting hackman, whose mute perplexity declared itself in the ludicrous expression of his ruddy face.

Coleman knew better than to delay for questions at such a time. He had learned by experience that the intense mental application under which Boyd invariably labored, when at work on any case appealing to his peculiar talents, always rendered him irritable and impatient, and frequently so self-absorbed that food and sleep were utterly ignored for days at a stretch.

The central office man merely nodded, therefore, signifying that he understood; and he deferred his departure only to ask:

"Got any idea of the parties, Felix?"

Boyd replied while hurriedly removing his linen collar and tie:

"The audacious boldness of the trick, assuming I'm right, Jimmie, and the nerve and cunning the rascals displayed, indicate that it was turned by some of the old gang—possibly by the Big Finger himself. Egad, I hope so, too! I'd give a year's pay for the satisfaction of snapping bracelets around that crafty miscreant's wrists. Come, come, Jimmie, an hour flies quickly!"

"Trust me, Felix," returned Coleman, starting for the door. "I'll have your house covered in half the time. Look for me in front, Felix."

"I'll remember," nodded Boyd, as the door closed. "Now, Casey, my good fellow, come out of that rig you

have on. I must borrow your clothes and your hack for an hour or two."

This unexpected proposal sent Casey, figuratively speaking, into the air.

"Borrow me clothes, is it? And me hack?" he cried shrilly. "Bedad, I guess not! I'll have none o' that. Sure, sor, I'd stand for me duds, if thim was the limit. But not for me hack—niver!"

"Both clothes and hack, Casey, my good man," said Boyd firmly. "So don't argue the matter, but come up to the dough dish gracefully. Otherwise I must send to headquarters for an officer—and a pair of bangles for you."

"Bangles, is it?"

"Now come with me into the next room, like a good fellow. Sit right there in the light from the window, that I may see you plainly. Yours is rather an ordinary mug, on the whole, and I think I can duplicate it. Surely well enough to fool a knave who has seen you but once. Sit still, now, Casey, and keep your eye on me. I'll show you a thing or two worth knowing—not often I do so for strangers. Ah, here's the very wig—matches your topknot perfectly. Sit quietly, now, and we'll shift rigs a little later. Warm, isn't it?"

As men of far greater mental strength often had done, Casey had wilted like a wet rag under the insinuating influence of Felix Boyd. With an expression of ludicrous helplessness, not unmingled with curious interest, he had accompanied Boyd into the latter's dressing-room, containing his nondescript wardrobe and the requirements for effecting almost any kind of disguise, and there had seated himself as directed.

Casey's dubious misgivings, moreover, gave way to mingled admiration and delight, as he watched the artistic transfiguration gradually perfected by Felix Boyd. At the end of half-an-hour, the hackman, staring with wide eyes at his companion, could honestly have declared that he thought himself staring into a mirror.

"God save you, Mr. Boyd, you're a devil, so you are!" said he, when the latter was about ready to depart, clad in nearly all of Casey's garments.

"Hardly that," rejoined Boyd. "Bear in mind that you are to remain here until I return."

"That I will, sor, and not l'ave—say! do I look like you, sor, whin I'm meself?" Casey broke off to demand bullishly, with an indescribable grin.

"Well, very nearly," said Boyd, as he slipped a brace of revolvers into his hip pockets.

"Thin, by the powers, I'll stay here till dark, so I will. If I look like that, sure I niver ought to be out in daylight. I'll wait here, sor, niver fear."

Boyd drew the cap of the hackman over his brow, then tendered the cigar which Casey had displayed before the exchange of garments.

"Enjoy a smoke while you wait, Mr. Casey," said he, with sinister dryness. "Have it, not on me, but on—the under-secretary! God willing, I'll presently have him smoking—in another fashion!"

About half-past four that afternoon, Casey's hack appeared for the second time that day at the house in Thirty-first Street, and the driver mounted the stone steps and rang the door-bell.

The summons was answered by a stout female servant. Her sleeves were rolled above the elbows of a pair of brawny red arms. Her eyes took on a threatening gleam, and her head an aggressive cant, when she beheld the man on the steps, much as if she dared him to enter without being asked.

Boyd first was for feeling his way, however, despite his firm convictions.

"Is the boss at home, mum?" he hastened to ask. "I mane the gintleman I was after bringing up here this morning."

"No, he is not," said the woman curtly. "He does not reside here."

"Bedad, that's bad! Phat'll I do——"

"Why bad?" the woman sharply demanded. "Why do you say it's bad?"

"Because I'm after losing a trunk chick, a brass wan, which was given me by a fare early this morning, and I——"

"Well, you don't think you lost it here, do you?" cried the woman snappishly.

"Sure, mum, it fell out o' me pocket in some place," protested Boyd, with dubious pathos. "And whin I was up in your third flure front, I thought I was after hearing a jingle, like as if something had dropped, which I then didn't think much about. But mebbe 'twas me trunk chick, mum. Would you l'ave me go up again, to look about a bit on the flure? I've got to find it, mum, or the divil's to pay."

"Pay him, then, and——"

"Wait a moment, Jane," interposed a man, just then emerging from the adjoining room, from the window of which he had noted that the hack at the curb was empty. "What does the driver say—that he lost a trunk check here?"

"Yes, Mr. Kelsey."

"Then let him come in and search for it, if he wishes."

"If you say so——"

"Come in, cabbie," cried Kelsey curtly. "What sort of a check was it?"

He approached the door while speaking, and Boyd now saw that he recently had shaved off a full beard, a fact evinced by his slightly fairer complexion over the surface lately protected from the sun and weather.

Boyd wanted no more conclusive proof that the man he now beheld was the scamp who had pretended to be Dearborn's under-secretary, the crafty rascal who had lured the consul's daughter from the steamer, yet of whom Casey had not caught even a glimpse. Why the beard had been so quickly removed was also obvious, since any description of the girl's abductor would naturally include it.

With no betrayal of these impressions, however, Boyd hastened to reply, as he entered the house:

"The chick was a brass wan, sor, for a trunk at the Grand Cintral. With your l'ave, sor, I'll look about a bit on the flure upstairs, where I wint for the trunk this morning."

Kelsey closed the front door, then quietly turned the key, and removed it.

Boyd did not hear him, but with a furtive glance he discovered that the key was gone.

"Certainly, cabbie," said Kelsey, "I'll go upstairs with you. If the check is there, we probably can find it."

"Thankee, sor, yit I'm not liking to trouble you to go up."

"No trouble at all, cabbie. Lead the way."

"Bedad, I can do that, having been up there once."

Followed by Kelsey, Boyd now proceeded to an ordinary chamber on the third floor, where he at once began searching about the floor under the bed, with a diligence well calculated to impress the former that his pretensions were genuine. Kelsey, meantime, stood watching him from the open door, where he presently was joined by a powerful, smoothly shaven man, a furtive glance at whom convinced Boyd that he was the one by whom Casey had been engaged at the pier.

"Who is this fellow, Kelsey?" he asked, in a sonorous undertone.

"The cabbie who brought you up here, Gilroy," was the reply. "He says he lost a trunk check here, so I invited him up to search for it."

"Quite properly, too," muttered Gilroy, as he caught the expression in Kelsey's sinister eyes.

"Mebbe I'm after being mistaken," cried Boyd, now looking up and quickly touching his cap as if he recalled Gilroy. "I can't find it anywhere on the flure."

"Did you really expect to find it?" demanded Gilroy bluntly.

"I did, indade. Why else would I come here?"

"That's precisely what I want you to tell me."

"Phat's that?"

"Come, come, this trunk-check yarn is much too fishy." Gilroy now cried, with an aggressive headshake. "You don't expect us to swallow such a cock-and-bull story as that, do you? It doesn't go down, my man."

"It doesn't, eh?" growled Boyd, with brows knitting.

"Not by a long chalk. Now out with the truth. Who sent you here?"

"Divil a soul sint me," declared Boyd. "I came on me own hook."

"But not to look for a trunk check. That won't go down."

"L'ave it stay up, then. You'll get no more out o' me. I'll go about me business——"

"You'll stay right where you are till you've disclosed your business," Gilroy harshly interrupted, stepping quickly into the room and closing the door. "Turn that key, Kelsey! I'll have the truth out of this fellow, or I'll know the reason why. Now, you red-headed rascal, out with it, or I'll break every bone in your skin."

"Aizy, aizy, with me, sor!" cried Boyd, shrinking to one corner. "Sure, I'm not looking for trouble."

"Well, you've found it all right, unless——"

"Kape your hands off! L'ave me have time, I say, and I'll tell the whole business."

"Out with it, then, and quickly, or you'll have no wind with which to tell it."

Gilroy drew back a pace and lowered his threatening hand, yet it was obvious that both he and Kelsey were ready for any sort of violence, to prevent Boyd's departure and compel him to explain his intrusion. Yet neither so much as dreamed that he was other than Casey, the hackman.

This was the very situation Boyd had aimed to create, as it opened the way for one of those crafty moves eminently characteristic of him, by which he felt sure he could locate the missing girl.

For a moment, however, he shifted nervously from one foot to the other, with eyes evading Gilroy's threatening gaze, and appeared for all the world as if he felt himself helplessly cornered, and quite at a loss how to explain.

"Come, come, who sent you here?" Gilroy impatiently repeated.

"No wan, sor, on me word," protested Boyd. "I'll give it to you straight, so I will."

"Out with it, then."

"On the level, sor, 'twas like this: I was up at the Grand Cintral with me hack a spell ago, waiting for a fare, whin a man I'm after knowing only by name came up and began to question me."

"About what?" cried Kelsey, darting nearer.

"Sure, 'twas about a girl who's missing from the steamer *Umbria*, the same which arrived this morning."

Boyd glibly continued; as if, having fairly begun, he now had pulled himself together. "He said as how she'd been stolen, abdocted, or some such word, d'ye see? Thin he asked me——"

"Who asked you?" demanded Kelsey, in irrepressible excitement. "Whom do you mean by he?"

"Sure, sor, his name is Byrd, or Boyd, or the like of that, with an office down in Pine Street. He said——"

"By God! he means Felix Boyd!" cried Kelsey, with a ghastly paleness sweeping over his face. "I told you, Gilroy, that——"

He broke off abruptly, to dart to the window and look out; while Gilroy, with an ominous frown, growled angrily:

"Dry up, you fool, and leave this fellow to me! Hark you, cabbie! Are you sure the man's name is Boyd?"

"There's divil a doubt of that, sor. I've had him for a fare times enough. That's how I know where his office is."

"In Pine Street?"

"It is, sor."

"What questions did he ask you?"

"He asked me was I at the Jane Street pier this morning, so he did, and what fares I brought away with me."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I had two gints for Thirty-first Street. Thin he asked me was I sure they had no girl with them."

"And you?" cried Gilroy, with suppressed vehemence. "What did you say to that?"

"What would I be like to have said?" queried Boyd, with a crafty leer. "Sure, sor, the tip he'd given me was enough to close me trap till I could make meself wise to the whole game, if there was after being any."

Gilroy started slightly, and now eyed Boyd with a decided change of interest, as he suddenly perceived a possible motive for his visit.

"But we had no girl with us," he protested. "Surely you told him that."

"Bedad, sor, that's just what I told him."

"Did you give him the number of this house?"

"*I did not!*" declared Boyd, with decisive emphasis. "*I told him I was after forgetting it.*"

With a look of relief, Kelsey swung round from the window.

"He must be giving it to you on the level, Gilroy," he cried. "I can discover no one watching this house. If Boyd really has any line on us——"

"Dry up!" Gilroy sharply interrupted. "Why should we care for Felix Boyd? See here, cabbie! I don't quite fancy this tale you're telling. What sent you here again? That's what I want to know."

Boyd met with a leer of self-satisfied cunning the frowning eyes of the speaker, and gave his shoulders a significant shrug.

"Sure that ought to be aizily guessed," said he, with dry assurance.

"What do you mean by that?" growled Gilroy, aggressively.

"I mane what I say," replied Boyd, with a series of nods. "With the tip I had given me, I'd be a good bit of a blockhead if I wasn't wise to something doing."

"Something doing!" echoed Gilroy, with an oath. "Do you imply, you rascal, that we abducted that girl?"

"Sure, sor, I don't say you did."

"You'd better not, you dog!"

"But I do say this," added Boyd, edging away with a crafty grin. "I do say it looks a good bit like it."

Gilroy's face grew hard as flint, and his voice as cold as steel.

"What looks like it, cabbie?" he demanded, with ominous quietude.

The grin gracing Boyd's countenance became a leer when he replied.

"What for did you sind me away from me hack at the pier?" he asked pointedly. "Why did you get your friend with the wake eyes inside of it while I was gone, and thin pull down the curtains? Why did you sind me away up here three flures for a trunk, which wasn't here, save to get some wan into this house, without me knowing it? Sure, sor, 'twas a nate trick you played, so it was; but I'd be a dale of a blockhead if I hadn't got wise."

The frown on Gilroy's white face had steadily deep-

ened, yet he snapped blindly at the bait which Boyd craftily had cast him.

"You red-headed blackguard," he growled; "if you thought yourself wise to so much, why did you not give all of the facts to Felix Boyd?"

Boyd shrugged his shoulders significantly, and began to laugh.

"What the devil could I make telling Boyd?" he slyly asked.

"Oh, ho! you are on the make, then, are you?"

"Sure, sor, if there's anything doing I'd like to make sure I'll get mine."

"Get yours, eh? Is that what sent you here?"

"Sure it is," nodded Boyd. "Why else would I come?"

"And suppose—merely suppose it, mind you—that we have the girl here in this house," said Gilroy cautiously, "what then?"

"Thin, bedad, you may kape her here till doomsday for all I care—so be it I get my little bit of the blunt for kaping me mouth closed."

"And if not?"

"Thin, sor, I'll blow the whole business, so I will," Boyd bluntly declared, with an emphatic headshake.

Gilroy hung fire for a moment, and then swung round to his confederate.

"What do you say to this, Kelsey?" he grimly demanded.

Kelsey was as pale as a ghost, and trembling visibly.

"It looks as if we were up against it," he answered huskily. "If we could only consult the Big Finger——"

"Silence, you fool! We can't ring him into this."

"The trouble is, then, can we trust this dog of a cabman?"

"Sure, gents, you can trust me," cried Boyd, with a splendid display of assurance.

"Hark you, cabbie!" Gilroy now exclaimed. "We'll do what's right, if you'll agree to do the same."

"Sure, sor, I will."

"I'll admit that we have the girl here, but we're no winners from her as yet. The game is still to be played. *It's a game to bleed her father, who has money to burn.*

If we can force him to pay a ransom, or to offer a big reward, we can easily line our vests with the stuff."

"Bedad, it looks aisy."

"If you'll agree to take a hand in the game——"

"First wait a bit," interrupted Boyd, now anxious to learn even more. "Sure, sor, I'm wan who likes to know just what he's going up against. Who the divil is the Big Finger you were sp'aking of, and where does he hang out whin he's at home?"

It proved to be a very unfortunate question, as if Boyd had hit upon a most dangerous theme; for a blaze of quickened suspicion instantly flamed up in Gilroy's dark eyes, and his right hand glided swiftly to his hip pocket.

"See here, cabbie!" he cried, with abrupt ferocity, "why do you ask about the Big Finger? What do you know of the Big Finger?"

"Sure, sor, nothing at all——"

"You lie! You're too inquisitive—too damned inquisitive—for one who knows nothing!"

"Oh, I say——"

"You're not what you say—nor your game in coming here!" thundered Gilroy passionately. "Kelsey, the door! Speak out, now, and the truth, or I'll——"

"You'll invite a bullet, Gilroy, if you pull that gun!" Boyd sharply interrupted. "And you, Kelsey, stand where you are! If you open that door I'll drop you dead on the threshold!"

Boyd's hands suddenly had issued from the pocket of his coat, each gripping a revolver, leveled squarely at the heads of his startled and dismayed observers.

Despite weapons and warning, however, Gilroy whipped out his revolver and instantly fired. As the move was made, Boyd dropped nearly to the floor and returned the shot, sending a bullet crashing through Gilroy's wrist, and his weapon flying to the wall behind him.

Kelsey uttered a shriek of dismay, and opened the chamber door.

"Stop!" thundered Boyd.

Kelsey stopped as if suddenly turned to stone.

"Oh, my God!" groaned Gilroy, writhing with pain and rage near the wall. "What's the meaning of this?"

"It means, you rascal, that you are confronted by Felix Boyd himself," cried the latter. "Careful, Kelsey, or you'll not live to see the morrow. Now, about face, both of you, and march down to the sidewalk."

There was that in Boyd's voice which no sane man would have disregarded, and under the threatening muzzles of his revolvers the two helpless scoundrels proceeded to obey.

Already there were sounds of breaking doors below, and Jimmie Coleman, with officers, from the rear of the house, all of whom had heard the reports of the weapons, met Boyd and his prisoners on the stairs.

"Clamp these scamps in irons, Jimmie, and put them in Casey's hack," Boyd hurriedly commanded. "I want their landlady before she can slip away, also the victim of their knavery. I'll land them alone all right. You look after these fellows."

And Felix Boyd dashed down to the basement of the house, where he very speedily accomplished all that he had promised. The landlady wilted like a wet rag when confronted with the altered situation, and conducted Boyd to a basement room in which the abducted daughter of the English consul had been confined since morning. Half-an-hour later the rescued girl was delivered to the arms of her overjoyed father.

"I felt quite sure of the result from the outset, Jimmie," remarked Felix Boyd, when discussing the case in his office that evening. "I saw the game from the first."

"But how did you get wise to it so quickly," inquired Coleman, who had just come from lodging his prisoners in the Tombs.

"Oh, it was not so blind," smiled Boyd over his pipe. "The girl's arrival had been heralded by the press, and Kelsey now has confessed that he and Gilroy discovered, purely by chance, that nobody was at the pier to meet her. I suspected that, Jimmie, when I learned that *she* and the Kendalls waited and watched so anxiously *on the steamer's deck*, in plain view from the pier."

"Ah, I see."

"The girl was observed by Kelsey, and the situation at once suspected. Then Gilroy telephoned to Dearborn's office, learning that he was in court, and the two rascals immediately planned the abduction, which was very simple and easily accomplished."

"But what gave you a clue to them?"

"The very simplicity of the case," laughed Boyd. "I knew that the job could not have been previously planned, since the absence of Dearborn could not have been anticipated."

"Surely not."

"That at once made it apparent that the knaves must have employed some regular hackman, since they would not have dared to walk off with the girl, and that they in some way deceived the cabbie as to his passengers. Then it came down to locating the cabbie, which proved to be a rather difficult job, he being ignorant of his unintentional cooperation with the knaves. Finally, however, I ran upon Casey, whose replies to my questions quickly put me on the track of my men."

"Clever work, Felix," murmured the central office man.

"The rest proved easy, once I had made sure the girl still was in their house," laughed Boyd. "Yet the affair shows them to be two very clever rascals, who now are well out of the way. They prevailed upon the landlady to join in the game, in the hope of gain, after getting the girl under cover."

"Did the girl have no suspicion until then?"

"Not the slightest. She believed that Kelsey was, indeed, her father's under-secretary, and Gilroy was introduced as a friend of the consul. The girl went into the trap like a fish into seine. Had it not been for her sake, and the uncertainty over successfully working out the scheme, I should have gone further with this case."

"In what way, Felix?"

"One of these scoundrels let drop a remark about the Big Finger, Jimmie, in a way convincing me that they are identified with the gang of criminals and blacklegs governed and directed by that obscure genius for crime. *I then ventured to question them about him," added*

Boyd, with a laugh, "and that immediately roused Gilroy's suspicion and precipitated trouble."

"He wouldn't stand for it, eh?"

"Not for a minute," smiled Boyd. "I am inclined to think, however, that this affair of Kelsey and Gilroy was only an impulsive flier on their part, so to speak, of which the Big Finger really knows nothing. At all events, Gilroy protested that he should not be rung into it."

"That sounds as if they were far from strangers."

"Nor are they, Jimmie, take my word for that."

"Can't they be forced to reveal the identity and whereabouts of that archrascal?"

"No, sir."

"Not worth trying, eh?"

"No, sir."

"Why so positive?"

"Because, Jimmie, that which seals their lips regarding the Big Finger is a sentiment to which all men yield greater subservience than to any other."

"What is that, Felix? Fear?"

"Precisely," cried Boyd, with an emphatic nod. "It is fear of the Big Finger that silences Paul Wykoff, up in Sing Sing, and every other member of this gang whom we have been clever enough, or lucky enough, to land behind prison bars. There is not a man among them, either at liberty or doing time, but fears the Big Finger for life itself. He rules them by fear, and that he thus can do so plainly indicates his rare ability and extraordinary power."

"That's true, Felix."

"But wait a little while, Jimmie, just wait a little while," Boyd grimly added, with some feeling. "If I am the man you think me, as I truly hope I may be, the days of the Big Finger and his gang are nearly numbered. He is a man of power, of vast criminal resources, a man to be feared, and a man whose misdirected genius one cannot but respect; yet I am framing up a plan by which, save that he proves to be the shrewder and bolder of the two, I yet shall land him. I am gradually framing up a plan, by which I shall—ah, Jimmie, but wait a little while! Just wait!"

The Case of the Boss Mason.

I.

"Dynamite—that's what it was, Jimmie," said Mr. Felix Boyd.

"Think so?" tersely queried Coleman, the central office man.

"Observe the broken pavement, and the deep excavation caused by the explosion," said Boyd. "The main volume of force operated in a downward direction, which is a distinctive characteristic of the explosive mentioned. There's no doubt about it, Jimmie. It was an explosion of dynamite."

"But what the dickens can have caused the explosion, at such a time and in such a place?" growled Coleman perplexedly.

Felix Boyd smiled faintly, with rather an odd expression lurking in the depths of his keen, gray eyes.

It was about nine o'clock on a Saturday morning in November. Boyd and the central office man, at whose request the former had visited the scene, were standing in one of the streets of the banking-district, that wealthy and strenuous section of New York to which Coleman was officially assigned.

It was in this section, moreover, that Mr. Felix Boyd served with his remarkable talents some of the mightiest monarchs of the financial world—men who knew him to be an unrivaled genius in the art of criminal detection; yet his long series of successful operations had been so quietly and secretly conducted that he still remained a baffling mystery to the thousands who knew him by sight or hearsay only.

Although the shocking features of the notorious Getchel and Dobson murders doubtless are still vivid in the minds of many, the details of the work done by

Felix Boyd in that celebrated case are not so generally known; and no chronicler of Boyd's exploits below the dead-line could consistently omit, from a selection from over three hundred cases, that of the one mentioned.

On this particular Saturday morning, Boyd and Coleman stood looking at a large cavity in the street, where the earth and paving-stones had been dislodged by a sudden startling explosion the previous Thursday.

The cause of the explosion was a great mystery. It had occurred at precisely a quarter before five in the afternoon, and within a few feet of the high board fence built by the contractors erecting the new Stanley Building, the walls of which were then constructed as high as the sixth floor. This fence closed in the sidewalk for something like fifty yards, excluding travel over that section.

No plausible theory in explanation of the explosion could be advanced. The builders had at no time done any blasting, nor had any explosives on the premises. No doubtful characters had been observed, no suspicious circumstances bearing upon the incident could be discovered, nor could any advantage be conjectured to have led to the deliberate committing of such an act.

In fact, it was only known that, at a time when the immediate locality was entirely deserted, the explosion had occurred with a violence that shook the neighboring buildings, bringing their startled occupants into the smoke-filled street, and drawing every laborer on the Stanley Building to the wall and windows of the front elevation, to learn the occasion of the sudden startling noise.

In order to have him view the scene, and to get his opinion regarding the incident, Coleman had brought Boyd there this Saturday morning, on the second day following the mysterious episode.

"I'm blessed if I can fathom it, Felix," the central office man went on to remark, while Boyd stood gazing indifferently at the unfinished face of the lofty building opposite.

Presently he rejoined, in rather disinterested fashion:

"Why do you try to fathom it, Jimmie?"

"Why?"

"What is there in it for you, providing you do fathom it?"

"Oh, nothing at all, as far as that goes," growled Coleman. "Yet I am infernally curious to know the cause of the explosion."

"An old maid's curiosity," laughed Boyd. "Frequently, Jimmie, such incidents are never explained. If it was an accident, the responsible party himself may be ignorant of what he inadvertently has done. A stick of dynamite carelessly dropped, and afterward exploded by a brick fallen from yonder wall, might serve for an explanation."

"Humph!" grunted Coleman. "That's rather too far-fetched."

"Very likely," laughed Boyd. "On the other hand, if the explosion was deliberately planned and executed—Ah, well, Jimmie, in that case you may safely wager that the perpetrator of it had himself guarded against detection, and that his motive is too obscure to be reached by mere guessing. I must return to my office, Jimmie. Are you going along with me?"

"Yes; as far as Wall Street," nodded Coleman, with a disappointed look. "I really did think that you, Felix, with your detective tact and your genius for anticipating and preventing crime, would light upon some solution of this mystery."

For a moment Boyd did not reply. He turned first one way, then the other, like one in doubt which to take, during which casual move his keen, gray eyes searched the street in both directions, and every person and doorway within a hundred yards. Then he carelessly rejoined, as they sauntered toward the nearest corner and presently approached Broad Street:

"You thought I would light upon some solution of the mystery, eh?"

"I certainly did, Felix."

"Jimmie," said Boyd gravely, "to anticipate and prevent crime, upon which occupation of mine you just remarked, is far from easy. It is much more difficult than to detect and apprehend criminals after a crime has been committed."

"I can imagine so," Coleman indifferently replied.

"Yet I have been tolerably successful, Jimmie. In looking over my record yesterday, I found that, of the seventy-eight cases in which I modestly have played a part during the past year, in eleven only were the crimes actually committed. In the other sixty-seven, Jimmie, I prevented the crime or forestalled the designs of the criminals, and in most cases landed some of them behind prison bars. That's not so bad, eh?" smiled Boyd oddly.

"I should say not, Felix."

"Still, Jimmie, one cannot invariably anticipate knavery, let one's vigilance and discernment be ever so keen."

"Surely not. Knaves work in the dark, and one who can see well in the dark is a bit over the average—like yourself, Felix."

Boyd laughed softly.

"Now, Jimmie, if I really were to undertake explaining that explosion," he oddly drawled, after a moment, "I should be tempted to say— Hello! what's here?"

From the vestibule of one of the Broad Street office buildings a man who had observed Coleman passing dashed quickly down the steps and accosted him.

"You're Detective Coleman, of the central office?" he asked somewhat excitedly.

Both Boyd and detective halted, and the latter answered:

"Yes. What's the trouble? Anything wrong?"

"I am not sure, sir; yet things don't seem quite right. There are two women here, each looking for her husband, who is mysteriously missing."

"Who are the women?"

"One is a Mrs. Getchel, who states that her——"

"Stop a moment, sir," interposed Boyd abruptly. "To what Mr. Getchel do you refer?"

"Caleb Getchel, the banker. His office is in this building."

"He is on my list of patrons, Jimmie," said Boyd significantly. "Allow me to look into this, will you?"

"Certainly."

"Where are these women, Mr. ——"

"Warner, my name is."

"I wish to see them."

"They are at the elevator door, sir. In the lower corridor. Both appear very anxious, and uncertain what to do. I think——"

"Come with me, Jimmie."

Boyd did not wait for Warner to state what he thought, but dashed up the steps and entered the building, closely followed by Coleman, and led the way toward the elevator.

Near-by in the corridor stood two middle-aged women, one quite fashionably clad, the other only plainly; but each wore upon her face a marked expression of anxiety and distress.

Boyd easily surmised which was the wife of the banker, and he quickly addressed her as he approached.

"You are Mrs. Getchel, madam, I take it," said he, raising his hat. "I am a personal friend of your husband, and, in a way, am in his employ. Do I understand that Mr. Getchel is missing?"

Both women turned eagerly to Boyd, as to one displaying authority; and Mrs. Getchel hastened to reply.

"Missing—yes, sir," said she, in tremulous tones. "I cannot understand it, and feel dreadfully anxious. He never remains away——"

"One moment, please," said Boyd courteously. "When did you last see him?"

"Not for nearly a week, sir. I went to Boston last Monday, and returned home only last evening, expecting to be met by my husband. Yet he did not come home last night, nor is he now in his office."

"Has he been living at home during your absence?"

"No, sir. He has been at the Hoffman House. But he knew that I was to return last night, and wrote me that he would be at home, as usual."

"Have you been to the Hoffman House to inquire?"

"I have not. I expected to find him here, but his office is locked."

"Possibly he has been suddenly called away on business."

"In that case, sir, he certainly would have left word

for me," protested Mrs. Getchel. "Besides, sir, here is another woman in precisely the same situation."

Boyd's earnest eyes took on a subtle gleam, and he turned quickly to the woman mentioned.

"Do I understand that your husband, also, is missing?" he asked.

The plainly clad woman pushed back her veil, and bowed nervously.

"Yes, sir," she replied. "I am terribly anxious about him."

"Has he an office in this building?"

"He is the watchman and janitor here, sir, and he has not been home since Wednesday night."

"What is his name?"

"Dobson, sir. Joseph Dobson."

"Did you come here to look for him Thursday, or yesterday, Mrs. Dobson?"

"No, sir; I did not," Mrs. Dobson hastened to explain. "There are two janitors employed here, sir. One works nights, and the other days, and they alternate each week. This is my husband's week for working days, but sometimes he does double duty when the other man wishes to go away, and I felt no alarm over his absence until this morning."

"Ah, I see."

"Then I came up to look for him," added Mrs. Dobson. "But I can learn nothing about him, and I encountered Mrs. Getchel, sir, in the same kind of trouble."

"Have you seen the other janitor?" demanded Boyd.

"I cannot find him, sir."

"He has been on duty each night, I can swear to that," put in Mr. Warner, who had joined the group. "He probably returned home, as usual, this morning, no doubt believing that Dobson has been here each day. They do not meet daily, I imagine, for the night man quits work at six in the morning, while the other does not come on duty until an hour later."

Boyd's eyes had knit closer, and he now turned gravely to Coleman.

"The absence of these two men indicates something serious, Jimmie," said he, with voice lowered. "The evidence points to something wrong in Getchel's office. We

had better get in there at once. Let's contrive to keep the women away pending our investigation. There's no knowing what we may discover."

"Tell them to wait here," growled Coleman tersely.

Boyd easily framed an excuse for keeping the women waiting, then he and Coleman entered the elevator and hastened to Getchel's office, which was on the third floor.

The door was locked, at which Boyd quickly dropped to his knee before it.

"Evidently it was locked from the outside, Jimmie," he presently observed. "There is no key in the lock."

"There may be nothing wrong here, after all."

"We shall see."

Boyd had drawn from his pocket a ring of skeleton keys. After a few moments he found one that would shoot the bolt, and he quickly arose and threw open the heavy door.

A double office was revealed. That into which they first entered was vacant, and Boyd quickly strode to open the door between the two rooms.

The inner office was the smaller, having no door to the adjoining corridor. It was nicely furnished, with leather chairs, roll-top desk, and a large safe in one corner.

The door of the safe stood wide open, with some of its inner drawers tossed in disorder upon the floor. Plainly, it had been rifled of its contents.

Upon the carpet a few feet away, with his arms outstretched, his skull fractured, and his head resting in a pool of congealed blood, lay Mr. Caleb Getchel.

He was stone dead.

"Good heavens!" cried Coleman, joining Boyd at the door. "This man has been murdered."

Boyd stood frowning darkly upon the shocking picture.

"Yes, and one of my patrons!" he muttered, with grim bitterness. "This, Jimmie, is another crime I have failed to anticipate and prevent, making an even dozen for the year. A bloody deed, planned in the dark and executed by fearless hands. God help the guilty! I'll not rest till I have run them down!"

These were the morbid utterances of a man shocked

and depressed by the tragic scene; a man deeply moved with a feeling akin to self-condemnation, solely because, though tireless in the interests of those he aimed to faithfully serve, he had failed to discover some indication of this terrible crime in time to run down the clue and prevent the murderous act.

Such self-censure, however, when one considers how secretly crimes are planned and how craftily executed, was entirely unwarranted. But this morbid sentiment was characteristic of Felix Boyd, and now his drawn, white face and furrowed brow plainly indicated that all the vengeful determination of which he was capable had been stirred to its depths.

"Murdered—yes!" said he, approaching to touch the body. "He has been dead for hours. His skull was beaten with a bludgeon."

"Horrible! But what of the missing janitor?"

"It is too early to say. Not here, evidently."

"The open safe——"

"It has been robbed, Jimmie—looted of its last coin," interrupted Boyd, rising from his knee on the floor. "The motive for the crime is manifest. See who's there. Let no one enter!"

II.

Footsteps were sounding in the adjoining corridor, and when Coleman hastened into the outer office several occupants of those near-by had gathered at Getchel's open door, among them Mr. Warner.

"Has anything happened here?" the latter hurriedly inquired. "I see you have the door open. I wondered all of yesterday over Getchel's absence. He's never away."

Before Coleman could reply, Boyd came hurrying from the inner room.

"His office was closed all of yesterday, was it?" he demanded, addressing Warner.

"Yes, sir; it was. Several of his customers came here, but could not raise him. Nor was he at the *Stock Exchange*, where he invariably may be found in *business hours*."

"Does he employ no clerks?"

"None, sir. He deals chiefly in stocks and bonds for a number of wealthy customers, and is always at the Exchange during business hours. Then he comes here daily and attends to his own bookkeeping. He has done so for years."

"You know him well, then?"

"Very well, indeed. I occupy the opposite office across the corridor."

"When did you last see Mr. Getchel?"

"I came from the Exchange with him Thursday afternoon, and left him entering his office. He then remarked that he had had a very busy day, and should be late over his books. Then he entered and locked the door."

"Locked the door!" echoed Boyd.

"Yes," bowed Mr. Warner, smiling faintly. "That has been his habit for years. Not wishing to be interrupted when engaged upon his books, he locked himself in his office, thus excluding intruders. I heard him turn the key after entering Thursday. Has anything befallen him?"

"I regret to state, Mr. Warner, that Getchel probably never left this office after you saw him enter it. He is dead."

"Dead, sir!"

"Murdered, and his safe robbed of every valuable."

"Heavens! Let me see——"

"Stay, sir, and all of you gentlemen!" commanded Boyd, quickly checking the group of startled men, who appeared inclined to enter in a body. "You must not come in before the officers have made an investigation. Detective Coleman, here, will insist upon that."

"Yes, surely," Coleman bluntly declared. "Remain in the corridor, gentlemen, every man of you. You'll learn the particulars of this affair soon enough."

"I think, Jimmie," Boyd now said, partly closing the door, "that you had better slip down and get an officer or two."

"So I think, and I must also send word to headquarters. Will you remain here while I am gone?"

"Yes," nodded Boyd. "Meantime, I will make an examination on my own hook. Stop a bit."

"Well?"

"While you are below, Jimmie, just break the news to Mrs. Getchel, will you?"

"That's a disagreeable job," growled Coleman.

"Somebody has to do it, and I prefer you, Jimmie, for I wish you to make sure that she is kept away from this office during my investigations. Send her home, Jimmie, and say that the body will be properly forwarded."

"Well, I'll do it, Felix, since you ask it of me."

"That's very good of you, Jimmie. One thing more."

"What's that?"

"Send Mrs. Dobson home also, saying that we find no trace of her husband, but will send word to her as soon as we have anything to report."

"By Jove!" muttered Coleman abruptly. "Isn't it probable that the missing janitor did this job?"

"At least possible, Jimmie, if not probable," replied Boyd. "I wish to make a quick study of these rooms, and with no intruders about. So get rid of both women by some means. I shall be here when you return."

"I'll not be away long," said Coleman, as he withdrew.

In artfully imposing these several obligations upon the central office man, Felix Boyd had a secondary object—that of gaining time in which to make a secret examination of the two offices, in search of any evidence bearing upon the crime.

As Coleman departed, Boyd stepped briefly into the corridor, and again addressed Mr. Warner.

"Have you seen Dobson, the janitor, this morning?" he asked.

"I have not seen him for several days," was the reply.

"Think a moment," said Boyd. "Can you state just when you last saw him?"

"Why, yes, I think so," said Warner. "I saw him Thursday afternoon, as I was starting for home."

"Here in the building?"

"Yes; he came down to this floor in the elevator, and left it just as I got in to go to the street."

"Did you observe which way he turned after leaving the elevator?"

"He came this way, I am quite sure."

"And about what time was it?"

"Between half-past four and five. I cannot say precisely."

"Thank you, Mr. Warner."

Boyd bowed and returned to the office, the door of which he now hastened to close and lock, with the key previously used.

Then he glanced at his watch.

"Ten minutes—I cannot hope for more," he grimly muttered. "I must have done in that time. I must get on their track—and accomplish it unseen."

He darted to the nearest window and looked out.

He was about to begin his investigation, and, had there been an observer during the next five minutes, he would have witnessed a most extraordinary scene. He would have beheld Felix Boyd as no man ever yet beheld him, with his strenuous mental operations depicted in his changing countenance, and evinced in his every rapid movement. He would have seen personified the relentless sleuth of blood-stirring fiction, the man metamorphosed into the hound, with both the hunter instinct and the human acumen stimulated to supernatural activity.

With lips compressed, with features drawn and white, with eyes that gleamed and glittered as if with fever under his knit brows, Boyd threw open the nearest window and looked out. He found it unlocked, and a glance gave him the external surroundings.

The window was on the third floor, and was nearly forty feet from the ground. It was in the rear wall of the building, as previously stated, and about midway of the block. Back of the block was an unpaved passage-way, or court, some ten or twelve feet wide, by which trucks and drays had access to the freight elevator and lower stores. Across this court rose the unfinished rear wall of the new building previously mentioned.

Boyd took in these pertinent features with a single glance, then quickly closed the window. Next he darted into the inner room, glanced first at the rified

safe, then at the gory body of the murdered man; but upon neither did he bestow any further attention.

Dropping to his hands and knees upon the floor, he took a lens from his pocket and began to study the carpet. Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard after yard, he wriggled over the floor, with the lens at his eyes and his face nearly touching the carpet.

Now and then he lingered over some particular spot; now and then a muttered word escaped him, or an impulsive gesture, indicating his constant mental activity; yet for the most part his work was done with amazing rapidity and in utter silence.

Presently he leaped to his feet again, then studied with his lens the sill of the window, and then the stone coping outside; and he was thus engaged when the knob of the door was forcibly turned, followed by a commanding knock on the panel.

Boyd instantly resumed his habitual air and aspect. Quietly closing the window, he thrust the lens into his pocket, then approached and opened the door.

"Ah, is it you, Inspector Byrnes?" he blandly inquired, with a nod and smile. "I decided that I would lock this door to exclude intruders, pending your arrival."

Followed by Coleman and three more of his detectives, the famous chief of the central office bowed and entered the room.

Mr. Felix Boyd modestly drew aside, and gave way to his superior authority.

"What do you make of this affair, Mr. Boyd?" inquired Inspector Byrnes casually.

"A brutal murder is about all that I can make of it, chief," said Boyd courteously.

Coleman, however, who was in much closer touch with Felix Boyd, lingered at the latter's elbow during the beginning of the investigation by the detectives, which here requires no record; and after about five minutes he ventured to ask, in a low whisper:

"Are you wise to anything, Felix?"

Boyd shook his head.

"Nothing worthy of mention, Jimmie," said he. "*Byrnes will probably see all that I have seen, and possibly a deal more.*"

"Humph!" muttered Coleman. "I'm not so sure of it."
 "When you are at liberty, Jimmie, I would like you to go with me."

"Say when, old man, and you'll find me ready."

"Let it be now, then," murmured Boyd.

Coleman lingered only to say a word to Inspector Byrnes, then accompanied Boyd from the office.

"I wish to have a look at the ground out back," said Boyd, as they sought the rear stairway. "It is barely possible that we may discover footprints having some significance. I have noticed that the ground is somewhat muddy."

"You think the criminals may have entered by the rear door of the building?" queried Coleman.

"It would have been quite natural, Jimmie."

"That's true. What did you discover up-stairs?"

"Scarcely anything," said Boyd evasively. "The time was too brief, Jimmie, before Byrnes arrived. Of course, I then had to drop into the background. Ah! here we are."

As he spoke, they emerged into the narrow court, back of the building. The unpaved ground was damp after a sharp shower which had fallen during the night, and Boyd briefly paused to stare down at the innumerable impressions in the clay, which were so intermingled as to present nothing at all to his purpose.

"Evidently nothing can be derived from them," said he, after a moment. "Come out this way, Jimmie."

Here and there upon the ground were bits of rubbish, broken bricks, small pieces of boards and laths, soiled shavings and the like, all of which had fallen from the rear of the building then in the process of construction.

The court led into a small open lot, at the end of the new building. In this lot were several mortar-beds, with the laborers at work about them; also an accumulation of empty lime and cement barrels, some loose lumber and strips of joist, while near the end of the court was a huge heap of rubbish, evidently the result of clearing the ground at intervals.

Slightly protruding from this rubbish heap was what appeared to be a pair of old soiled boots, evidently dis-

carded and thrown away; and to these Boyd indifferently called Coleman's attention.

"The old boots?" queried Coleman. "Yes, certainly I see them. What of them?"

"You cannot see the tops of them," said Boyd dryly. "They appear to be empty, all right, Jimmie, yet isn't it possible that there may be a man in them?"

The central office man vented one quick growl, and sprang toward the heap of rubbish. With a single sweep of his arm he threw aside a lot of loose shavings and bits of boards and laths. Then an involuntary cry, loud and thrilling, broke from him:

"By God! Boyd, you're right!"

Amid the refuse, with his entire form and disfigured face now plainly exposed, lay the body of Joe Dobson, the missing janitor.

Boyd hastened to join Coleman beside the murdered man, and a glance told him how death had been inflicted.

"Killed with a sand-bag, Jimmie," he cried grimly. "Two nasty blows on the head, not even breaking the skin, yet turning him down as if struck with a sledge."

"By all the gods, Boyd, I'm utterly baffled!" snarled Coleman. "How came the body out here? Both Getchel and Dobson killed, yet thus removed from one another! What devil's own mystery are we up against?"

Instead of replying immediately, Boyd bent to lay his hands upon the body, on the soiled coat covering the stilled heart, on the stiffened limbs, and even the worn boots, and then he thrust one hand amid the shavings and refuse on which the body was lying.

The shavings under the corpse were wet, also the boots; but the clothing of the dead man was comparatively dry!

Boyd knew it had not rained since midnight. Dobson's clothing being dry, and the refuse under his body being wet, the body must have been placed there since the shower. Yet the boots were wet and must have been out there when it rained.

This shrewd bit of detective work, by which very important facts were established, occupied Boyd but a mo-

ment. It was done as if in cursory examination of the body, moreover, and in a way that completely blinded Coleman to Boyd's secret designs. Nor did Boyd's countenance evince any new discovery, when he arose and replied to Coleman's impulsive remarks.

"A devil's own mystery, indeed, Jimmie," said he gravely. "It certainly is a deep one."

"But you," growled Coleman, frowning suspiciously, and pointing perplexedly at the body, "must have got some pointer to this. What the dickens sent you down here so abruptly, and how did you locate it so readily?"

Boyd smiled indifferently, and pointed through the court and up to the window of Getchel's office.

"Very simply, Jimmie," he explained, with a rather quizzical eye. "In looking from the window up there, I happened to see the refuse heap, with the boots protruding slightly. Any blockhead would have been equally suspicious, Jimmie, I am sure."

The face of the central office man plainly indicated that he distrusted Boyd's explanation; but before he could reply he was cut off by the gruff voice of a man then forcing his way through the group of laborers who had gathered near.

"What's the matter here?" he quickly demanded. "Goodness! a man dead!"

Boyd turned to face him, as the speaker recoiled slightly upon seeing the body; and he beheld a powerful, dark-featured man, with a full black beard. A man rather roughly clad, yet whose bearing was one of authority.

"Yes, sir, a dead man," said Boyd, bowing respectfully. "There was a murder committed in yonder building Thursday night, we think, and we have just discovered this body."

"Thursday night!" exclaimed the dark man impulsively. "You don't think that fellow did it, do you?"

"It's hard telling who did it, sir," smiled Boyd. "It rather looks as if he did."

"Then it must have been done before Thursday night, or my name's not James Doyle."

"Why so, Mr. Doyle?"

The Boss Mason.

"Because I saw the end of those boots sticking from that rubbish as long ago as Wednesday, if not Tuesday, and I can swear to that," declared Mr. Doyle confidently.

"Sure, sir, so did I," added one of the laborers.

Boyd's countenance did not change by so much as a shadow. He continued to meet with a faint smile of manifest perplexity the decisive stare of Mr. Doyle, and quietly remarked:

"Well, well, that's even more curious. As long ago as Wednesday, did you say? That surely was before the murder mentioned was committed."

"I can swear to it," replied Doyle, with an emphatic headshake.

"Are you about here some of the time, Mr. Doyle?"

"Am I? Certainly I am—all of the time! I am the boss mason."

"Ah! I see," murmured Boyd, still in obvious perplexity. "As long ago as Wednesday—eh? Of course, it didn't occur to you to investigate the boots, Mr. Doyle."

"Why should I?" said Doyle quickly. "They were half covered with dirt and refuse. I thought they were an old pair which somebody had thrown away."

"Naturally enough, Mr. Doyle, I am sure," admitted Boyd, with the countenance of a man utterly nonplused. "By Jove! Jimmie, this appears to be a mystery not easily solved. I can make no head or tail to it. I reckon we had better leave it to Inspector Byrnes and call him down at once. Will you wait here while I inform him?"

Coleman merely bowed, and Boyd, without a further glance at any of the group near-by, hastened back to Getchel's office.

Mr. Doyle turned to gaze after him, then reverted to the central office man, and asked:

"Who is that fellow, sir?"

"That," said Coleman absently, "is Mr. Felix Boyd."

Presently Inspector Byrnes came down to investigate; then one of his detectives came down, and soon after another appeared on the scene; and all the while Mr. Jimmie Coleman waited expectantly for the return of Felix Boyd, and wondered why he did not reappear.

But Felix Boyd, as if he suddenly had lost all interest in the case, had departed to his office in Pine Street.

III.

Whatever Mr. Felix Boyd thought about the double crime of that November night, an entire month passed before anything came of it. He did not disclose himself to Coleman, even, and as far as actions went he appeared to have no interest in the tragic affair.

Yet it engaged, meantime, the very best talent of the central office. Not the slightest discredit is reflected upon that bureau of secret investigation, however, because of the fact that it developed a theory subsequently proved to be fallacious by Mr. Felix Boyd. In this field of work, Boyd occupied a class entirely his own. To be corrected in such a matter by Felix Boyd by no means implied inferior intelligence, for Boyd's detective acumen was a gift rather than an acquirement, and was not a fair standard for measuring that of others.

The theory developed by the central office appeared well founded. The facts discovered seemed to verify it at every point. It was proved that Getchel, on the day of the murder, had made a very heavy purchase of bonds in the Stock Exchange, and had brought them to his office. The evidence further went to show that Dobson had learned about these bonds, and was cognizant of Getchel's habit of locking himself in his office; and that Dobson had, with the help of confederates and the use of his janitor's pass-key, entered Getchel's office and committed the crime.

What immediately followed could only be conjectured. Yet it appeared plain that the janitor, after the robbery, had left the building by the rear door with his confederates; and that they, presumably to secure his share of the booty, had killed Dobson in the vacant lot, and then concealed the body under the heap of refuse.

One circumstance, only not a very material one, appeared a bit curious. The boots found on Dobson's body were not his own, nor could his own be discovered. Those found on the body were not a fit, and had been

seen on the refuse heap several days before the double murder. Only one explanation could be advanced—that Dobson's confederates had, in order to complicate matters, removed the janitor's shoes, and put on the old boots found on the refuse heap.

On the whole, this theory of the central office appeared irrefutable, and the public accepted it. Yet at the end of a month, despite the tireless efforts of a score of detectives, not a clue to the criminals could be found, and the press and public were hammering the force and loudly decrying the long delay of justice.

It was at this time, on a warm, murky unseasonable night, well along in December, that Mr. Felix Boyd finally got in his work. A damp mist was in the air, lending a sickly yellow glare to the street lights. The pavements were wet and slippery, and all that was left of the last fall of snow lay foul and black here and there in the gutters.

Near closing time that night, Boyd entered an inferior saloon on the East Side. He was roughly disguised, walked with a swagger, and appeared like a hard ticket. He passed through the saloon and entered a small back room, in which a man sat waiting for him, with a glass and bottle on the table at his elbow.

The man was James Doyle, the boss mason at the new Stanley Building.

As Boyd entered the saloon, five men here and there in the adjoining street suddenly vanished from the sidewalk, some into obscure doorways, one into a side alley near the saloon, while a sixth presently entered the dive and lingered at the bar to drink a schooner of beer.

Doyle looked sharply up, and appeared relieved, when Boyd swaggered into the back room.

"So you're here at last," he growled, through his heavy beard. "You're late, Cassidy."

Boyd dropped into a chair, and reached for the bottle and glass.

"Couldn't help it," he tersely replied, with a rasp in his sonorous voice. "Got pinched over in Mott Street, and was run around to the station to be booked as a witness. Just got out. Isn't your man here?"

Doyle grimly shook his head.

"He wouldn't chance coming here, Cassidy," he rejoined. "You've got to go to him."

"Go to him be d——d!" cried Boyd, with an ugly snarl. "D'ye think I'm taking no chance in doing that?"

"Not a chance, Cassidy, on my word."

"What's that good for to me?" sneered Boyd angrily. "I might be treated with a crack on the block, the same as the others."

"Hush! Not so loud, you fool," protested Doyle apprehensively. "You'll not be harmed, I give you my word. If you've given it to me on the level, and can prove what you claim, you'll get all you ask for keeping your mouth closed. I have the big fellow's word for that."

"You said he'd come here to talk it over with me, the devil take him!"

"So I did, Cassidy, and I thought he would," protested Doyle, striving to pacify his companion's manifest resentment. "But he wants to meet you where it's safer, with no chance of being overheard, so stow your kick and come along. You'll quit no loser, Cassidy, on my word."

"I don't fancy taking any man's word, Mr. Doyle, when my own head may be threatened," growled Boyd less sullenly. "Mebbe it's all right, as you say, but it doesn't look it."

"There's nothing to fear, I tell you."

"Oh! I don't fear, so much as I don't like it. You said he'd come here, and he ought to have come. Where's the place I'm to meet him?"

"I'll take you there."

"You will, eh? Harkee, Mr. Doyle!" and Boyd now leaned across the table, with an ugly glare in his threatening eyes, and showed a revolver under his hearer's nose, adding quickly: "If any game is tried on me where we're to go, I'll make it a point to plug you full of lead at the first sign of it."

"That's good enough for me, Cassidy," declared Doyle readily.

"Come on, then. I'll go along with you."

"Not that way! We'll leave by the back door."

An odd gleam lurked in Boyd's eyes as he followed

the mason into the gloom of the side alley. There was a shadow there darker than the night, and as silent and stealthy.

Into a dark court, then through a labyrinth of foul alleys, Doyle conducted his companion; and finally led him into a covered passage terminating at a flight of wooden stairs, where he took Boyd's arm to guide him through the Egyptian darkness. Presently he rapped significantly on a door, which was quickly opened; and a moment later Boyd was ushered out of a dark entry, through which he had been led, and into quite a large room, lighted by a single oil-lamp in a wall bracket.

Boyd glanced sharply about. There were three occupants of the room. A man stood at either side of the door by which he and Doyle had entered. At an uncovered deal-table in the middle of the room sat the third; and in him Boyd again beheld, for the second time, the man he first had seen in the secret subterranean chamber to which he once had been lured—that obscure master criminal known only as the Big Finger, whose operations below the dead-line had for months been a constant menace, and whom Boyd long had vainly striven to locate and arrest.

His hard, smoothly shaven face wore an odd smile as Boyd came over the threshold, and he raised one of his hands from under the table and signed him to a chair directly opposite.

Boyd heard the door closed and locked, yet he gave no sign that he observed it. He took the chair indicated, whereupon the man opposite said, with a voice as hard as his features and as cold as the gleam in his narrow, gray eyes:

"Welcome, Mr. Cassidy. I have been told that your name is Cassidy. Did your friend object to coming, Mr. Doyle?"

"No, not overmuch, Mr.——"

"Silence! My name is not for his ears."

The interruption came quick and sharp, with one venomous look; and Boyd now shrugged his shoulders, and grimly growled:

"It strikes me you fellows are infernally skittish. D'ye think I've come here to queer any game of yours?"

The cold, gray eyes again sought his, with a cynical smile.

"Not at all, Mr. Cassidy," was the icy reply. "Understand me—it is not in your power to queer any game of mine!"

"I'm not so sure of it," retorted Boyd bluntly.

"That I am sure of it, Cassidy, is quite sufficient."

"Well, let it go at that."

"I have been told by my friend Mr. Doyle, whose acquaintance you have been cultivating during the past month, that you know, or claim to know, incriminating facts bearing upon a murder case of recent date."

Boyd grimly nodded.

"Aye, I do," said he.

"Possibly you know, or think you know, by whom the crime was committed?"

"Mebbe so."

"Suppose, Mr. Cassidy, that you name the guilty parties?"

"Suppose that I do nothing of the kind, Mr. —"

"Gluck will serve for a name, if you wish one," was supplemented, with a broader smile, the insinuating and treacherous character of which lent a fiendish assurance to the speaker's hard features.

"Well, then, Mr. Gluck," declared Boyd, with a series of ugly nods, "I'm not here to tell you what I know of that crime, leastwise not yet."

"For what, then Mr. Cassidy?"

"I'm here to learn what I can get for not telling others."

"To adjust a price for your silence, eh?"

"That's what, sir!"

Not once had the gaze of either diverted from that of the other. The two sat at opposite sides of the table, Gluck with his hands beneath it, and Boyd with his thumbs hooked through the armholes of his vest.

In the momentary silence following his last remark, Boyd heard a faint sound like that of a pebble dropped on a board—it was a pellet of lead on the stairs in the adjoining passage. Yet the sound was so slight that it was lost to ears not expecting it.

That something more was due to drop already was becoming decidedly obvious.

"I think, Mr. Cassidy," said Gluck, with cynical asperity, "that we shall not find it easy to come to terms. Understand me—I am not the sort of man who buys a cat in a bag."

"Well, I'm not selling a cat," retorted Boyd bluntly.

"Much the same, Cassidy. You ask me to buy your silence before I know what you can disclose."

"Oh! I know enough, as I've told Doyle——"

"Out with it, then!"

"Not until——"

"Then don't move, Cassidy! If you do I shall insure your silence with a bullet! I have decided, Cassidy, that you know too much for your own good!"

The hand of Mr. Gluck suddenly had emerged from under the table, on which it now rested, gripping a revolver squarely covering Boyd's breast.

Although not unexpected, this move came rather sooner than Boyd anticipated, and he had no immediate alternative but to obey. Yet his eyes took on a gleam more threatening, even, than that in the murderous eyes of the man opposite.

"Put up that gun," he commanded grimly. "You're four to one here, and hardly need that."

Gluck's frown became a venomous smile when he rejoined, with icy deliberation:

"I shall put it up, Cassidy, when I have made you otherwise secure."

"Otherwise secure?"

For the bare fraction of a second, Gluck's eyes were significantly raised to the two men back of Boyd, and the latter knew that he was to be seized from behind and secured. Knowing this scoundrel for what he was, and taking him at his face value at that moment, the design was one to which Boyd could not wisely submit.

With a whistle so shrill and sharp that it fairly pierced the walls of the dismal room, Boyd instantly threw himself against the table, thus evading the hands of the *two men*, and hurling Gluck backward in his chair to the *floor*. As the latter fell, his revolver was discharged, *and by a stroke of fortune that serves such a knave but*

once in a lifetime, the bullet crashed through the bracket lamp on the wall, and the blazing oil poured streaming to the floor.

Such a scene as that which followed could not be described in detail. With Boyd's loud whistle, there came the sound of crashing woodwork and breaking doors, the shouts of men outside, and the thundering tread of others in the near entry.

Amid the dense smoke that filled the room, lighted only by the swelling flames, Boyd made one blind, desperate effort to reach the man he had seen pitch backward to the floor. But he caught, instead, the falling section of a window, ripped with superhuman strength from its casing, and beheld through the smoke and glare the powerful figure of the Big Finger, as he leaped to a roof outside and instantly vanished in the darkness.

Then amid the clatter of breaking glass, the door of the room fell with a crash, and central office men, Coleman foremost, were grappling with Doyle and his two remaining confederates.

IV.

"A failure, Jimmie! From beginning to end, a beastly, humiliating failure! From start to finish, an infernally deplorable, disgusting fiasco!"

The above were Felix Boyd's bitter comments upon the case a few days later, while seated with Coleman in his Pine Street office. But the central office man, far from sharing Boyd's feelings, laughed deeply and shook his head.

"Not half-a-failure, Felix," he protested. "That word covers far too much ground. The case, aside from the escape of the Big Finger, was a grand success."

"Humph! That one feature is a wet blanket over all the others."

"Nonsense!" declared Coleman. "Is it nothing to have corralled three of the gang? Is it nothing to have forced a squeal from one of them, and to have fixed this crime upon Doyle and the others, thus clearing Dobson's injured name? Is it nothing to have recovered a part of *the stolen bonds*, and to have solved the entire mystery?"

Pshaw! you take it too seriously. Drop it now, and think no more about it."

"I'll drop it, Jimmie, only when I have that one remaining knave under my heel," said Boyd grimly. "However, we will let him rest for the moment."

"You have not yet informed me just how you got upon the track of these criminals, Felix."

"I have had no heart to tell you."

"Faugh! Cut that out for the present, and give me the main points, at least."

Boyd reached for his only solace—his pipe. Having filled and lighted it in silence, he relaxed sufficiently to comply with his friend's request.

"I should have informed you much earlier in the game, Jimmie, all of a month ago, but for one reason," he began.

"What was that?"

"I foresaw that my own work could not be accomplished very quickly, and in order to conceal my hand I was compelled to let the central office work up its erroneous theory. Knowing your obligations at headquarters, naturally I could not confide in you until I was ready to make my final move."

"Ah! I see," bowed Coleman. "But what about your own theory?"

Boyd smiled faintly through the circling smoke.

"My theory shaped itself from the start, Jimmie," he replied. "It began with the explosion in front of the Stanley Building, which, because of the mystery involving it, I suspected to have been designed to suddenly draw all of the laborers to the front wall and windows of the building for some purpose. When I learned that a crime had been committed at the same hour in the building back of it, I was convinced that I was right."

"Go on," nodded Coleman. "I follow you."

"The explosion occurred on Thursday night, just as darkness was falling," continued Boyd. "On entering Getchel's office, Saturday morning, I at once recalled the explosion and the hour when Getchel habitually was locked in his office. The central office overlooked the coincidence and the possible connection between the explosion and the murders, but I did not."

"I'll wager you did not," smiled Coleman.

"In searching Getchel's office, Jimmie, I discovered here and there on the carpet, with the help of a lens, some fine white particles of lime, and on the stone coping of the window in his main office a few tiny splinters of wood, hardly discernible with the naked eye. Plainly, Jimmie, the lime-dust had come from the soles of men's shoes who had been walking on the soiled floor of the unfinished rooms of the Stanley Building. Doubly plain, Jimmie, when the splinters on the coping indicated that a plank had been placed from window to window across the intervening court."

"Ah! I see!"

"From a window in the Stanley Building to that in Getchel's office is about ten feet. To run the plank across was the work of only a moment. That is precisely what was done. With the laborers removed from that side of the building, and with dusk to hide them from observation from below, the knaves quickly crossed to Getchel's window, and were in his office before he could give an alarm. One of them, presumably Doyle, remained in the Stanley Building and quickly withdrew the plank, while the crime was being committed."

"It was a hazardous trip, Felix, to cross a plank forty feet from the ground."

"The stake was worth it, and the men of the reckless kind."

"That's right, too. But how did you hit upon Dobson's part in the affair?"

"When I learned that he was seen approaching Getchel's office at about the time the murder was committed, I at once surmised that he, at least, had seen something arousing his suspicions. I knew that he could have had no hand in the crime, however, for he easily could have admitted confederates to Getchel's office with his janitor's pass-key, the latter always carrying his in his pocket."

"I see," remarked Coleman. "That would have done away with any need for a plank."

"Precisely, Jimmie. Therefore, Dobson presumably let himself into Getchel's office, to see if anything was

wrong; and being overheard by the miscreants there, he was promptly sandbagged the moment he entered."

"Clever deductions, Felix, on my word."

"Fairly so."

"But what was the motive for removing Dobson's body to the refuse heap, and how did you locate it so quickly?"

"Their motive was to throw suspicion upon Dobson, and to induce the very theory which the detectives subsequently formed. I knew it to be wrong, however. Upon the floor in Getchel's office I also discovered some fine bits of hemp, also on the coping of the window, convincing me that a rope had been used in the room. I readily guessed the truth. The murder not being discovered during Friday, the scoundrels meantime hit upon the plan to incriminate Dobson, and in the darkness of Friday night they returned by the same way to Getchel's office and lowered the body to the ground."

"And the removal of Dobson's shoes?"

"Merely a chance, Jimmie, to complicate matters."

"And why did you light upon Doyle so readily?"

"Because the work I knew to have been done, Jimmie, necessitated the cooperation of some boss about the Stanley Building. When Doyle so quickly put in an appearance after we discovered Dobson's body, and volunteered so much confusing testimony regarding the old boots, I was convinced that he was my man."

"And then?"

"Then it came to the trick of cultivating his acquaintance in disguise and of working upon his fears until I could drive him into bringing me in contact with his confederates, the identity of whom the crime itself suggested."

"So it did, indeed."

"Only this one arch-criminal, Jimmie, could have devised and executed such a crime as that," added Boyd, with bitter grimness. "And we lost him, Jimmie, the one most of all desired. So I say again, Jimmie, a beastly, deplorable failure—since we lost him!"

"But the end is not yet, Felix."

"No, no, Jimmie! You are right—the end is not yet!"

The Case of the Vacant Office.

I.

"Mr. Boyd!"

The summons brought no answer, and the youngster, Mr. Felix Boyd's office boy, scratched his head desperately, and glared with an expression of dubious apprehension and misgivings at the closed door of Boyd's private room, adjoining his office in Pine Street.

"Mr. Boyd! Mr. Boyd!"

Now there sounded from beyond the closed door a long, semi-subdued growl, like that of a caged lion disturbed, to which was supplemented the single word, much as if the growl had terminated in a snarl:

"Well?"

"A note from Coleman, sir! You're wanted—in a devil of a hurry!"

The last was much more expressive than elegant, yet it appeared to serve the purpose intended, for it was echoed by three heavy strides across the floor of the inner room, the door of which was then opened by Felix Boyd himself, with his hair disheveled, and his tie and collar awry, and on his face a look like that of a college student wrestling with Euclid.

As a matter of fact, Boyd had been head, neck, and ears in a study of the complicated evidence bearing upon the mysterious Gateley abduction and insurance fraud—a case very notorious at that time, the complicating circumstances of which had utterly baffled the brightest lights of the central office, resulting in a request from Inspector Byrnes that Boyd would examine the documents and data of the case, with a view to ferreting out a solution of the mystery, and thus set the detectives on the right track. It was from a study of this case that Boyd had finally arisen, after the repeated calls of his *office boy*.

"I thought I told you, Terry," he said, as he emerged from the room, "that I did not wish to be disturbed for twelve solid hours?"

"Except for something strenuous, sir," protested Terry, shaking his head with convincing earnestness. "Your own words, sir—'something strenuous.' Here's a note from Coleman, sir. Reads strenuous, sir. I'll leave it to you. So I ventured to stir you up. Hope you'll excuse me, sir."

Despite his smothered growls, there was a twinkling of amusement in Boyd's keen, gray eyes, and a smile almost paternal played about his thin, firm lips as he took the opened note from the lad's hand, and read it.

"FELIX: Join me in Room K 29, Exchange Building. Devil's own mystery! Rush! I'm waiting."
"COLEMAN."

Boyd read the penciled missive, then tossed it upon his desk.

"Strenuous, indeed, Terry," he said dryly. "You did quite right."

"Thought you'd say so, sir."

"My street coat, Terry, while I groom my disordered locks. Hat, too, my lad. Who brought the note?"

"Some chap about my size."

"What has become of him?"

"I fired him out, sir, before I took any chances of disturbing you," replied Terry Gowan, with a significant grimace. "I feared we both might be fired unless I did."

"Not much danger of that, Terry, since I know a good lad when I get one," laughed Boyd. "Remain here for a time, in case I telephone."

Before the lad could reply, the door had closed upon the speaker, and his steps were echoing down the corridor stairs.

The bond of affection between Felix Boyd and his friend of the central office, Jimmie Coleman, was a very strong one. Nothing less than an appeal from Coleman, such as that just received, or from one of the great financial houses to which he professionally was under obligations, would have taken Boyd from the matter that afternoon engaging him.

It was nearly two o'clock when he was interrupted as described, and within a quarter hour he entered the Exchange Building, and hastened to the office designated by Coleman.

It was a busy day in the market, the autumn boom being well under way; and the noise from the great chamber of the Stock Exchange, a roar like that of Niagara heard at a distance, still fell upon his ears as he left the elevator at the seventh floor.

Upon approaching Room K 29, Boyd saw the ground-glass windows between it and the corridor did not bear the firm name of any occupants, and he rightly decided that it was a vacant office. Yet, upon entering, he did not find it unoccupied.

Jimmie Coleman, two policemen, and Detective Akerman were standing in the room, while Dr. French, a physician who had been hurriedly summoned, was kneeling beside an unconscious man upon the floor.

The office was a rear one, yet quite commodious, and was entirely destitute of furniture—a fact that lent a peculiar significance to the scene that met Boyd's gaze. He was immediately joined by Coleman, however, and quietly asked:

"What's the meaning of this, Jimmie?"

"You tell me," replied Coleman. "It is a question more easily asked than answered. Leastwise, until yonder man can be put in shape to explain."

Boyd glanced again at the man upon the floor. He was well dressed, of medium height, and appeared to be about fifty years of age. On one side of his brow a dark bruise, extending well into the hair, plainly indicated what had befallen him, while, upon the floor near-by, were several strips of rope, with which he recently had been bound.

"What do you know about him?" inquired Boyd, reverting to the central office man.

"Only what you see," replied Coleman quietly. "A gentleman passing through the adjoining corridor heard groans from this office, and, knowing it to be vacant, he tried the door. Finding it locked, he summoned one of the officers employed in the building, who procured a key. They found this man insensible upon the floor, bound hand and foot."

"He had been knocked out with a sand-bag," said Boyd.

"Evidently."

"What does French say?"

"He thinks he presently can bring him to time."

"Not seriously hurt, then," remarked Boyd, with an eye on the physician's movements. "Have you made any inquiries, Jimmie, in the adjoining offices?"

"Yes, in both of them," replied Coleman, with a nod.

"No persons were seen entering here, nor were there any sounds of a disturbance heard by any one about here. Until the victim himself can explain, the affair is shrouded in mystery."

"Have you searched him?"

"Yes. His pockets are as empty as when his garments came from his tailor."

"Robbed, eh?"

"No doubt of it, I guess."

"Have you questioned the janitor?"

"Yes. He states that this office has not been occupied for about a month, and that the door is usually kept locked. He cannot account for the fact that strangers gained admission."

"Have parties been here lately to look at the office?"

"Not for more than a week."

"Who last occupied it?"

"Kelly & Griggs, the brokers."

"I know both of them to be honest," murmured Boyd thoughtfully. "Ah! Dr. French appears to be meeting with success."

Under the physician's vigorous ministrations the injured man was showing signs of recovery—a low moan, a fluttering of the eyelids, and a deeper inhalation of breath.

"Throw open that end window, Jimmie," said Boyd.

"Do you think, doctor, if we sit him upright against the wall, it will accelerate his recovery?"

"Very likely, Mr. Boyd, now that he is—— Ah! that's better! Take a swallow of this, my friend."

The stranger, now raised to a sitting posture against the wall, had opened his eyes, and he mutely drank a swallow from the flask the physician placed at his lips. *The stimulant* had a salutary effect, for a tinge of color

almost immediately imbued the man's cheeks, and he muttered confusedly:

"Good heavens! what's happened? Am I ill, or— Ah! you need not tell me! I remember—now!"

Boyd drew nearer, and knelt down to address him.

"Feeling a bit better, eh?" said he, in encouraging fashion. "I think you're not seriously hurt, sir. Pull yourself together, and try to tell us just what befell you. It may be worth something, you know, if we're to land the miscreant guilty of this job."

"I'm clear enough now, sir," replied the stranger, with a dubious attempt to smile. "My head feels like a tub, and aches like the devil; but I reckon the curs have not quite done me up."

"Tell me all about it, that we may get after them," said Boyd. "What is your name?"

"John Perry," was the reply, and the speaker braced himself higher against the wall. "I'm from Kansas, and arrived in New York at eleven o'clock this morning. What time is it now?"

"After two," replied Boyd. "Let's know how you were lured into this trap, for it plainly was a trap. Can you recall all of the circumstances?"

"Oh, yes," nodded Perry. "I'm clear enough now, and fit to give those curs as good as they sent. Ah! they've got my watch and money. I'm lucky it's no worse."

"State the circumstances, please," repeated Boyd, a bit impatiently. "We wish to land the rascals, if possible, and time is valuable."

"I can state the facts very briefly," Perry now rejoined. "I'm a stranger here; haven't set foot in New York for nearly ten years. I have business with Dunn & Raddam, the bankers, and was heading for their office when this scurvy trick was turned on me."

"How was it done? What led you to this vacant office?"

"That's easily explained, sir. Just as I was entering this building, on my way to Dunn & Raddam's office, one of their clerks stopped me."

"You mean a man who claimed to be one of their clerks," put in Boyd.

"I reckon that's about the size of it," admitted Perry, with a dismal smile. "At any rate, sir, he presented a business card bearing the name of the firm mentioned, and inquired if I was Mr. Perry, from Kansas."

"And then?"

"He said he believed he was right, judging from my traveler's coat and the broad felt hat I wore. I see that the rascals have relieved me of them, also."

"I observed that your coat and hat were missing," replied Boyd. "What sort of a coat was it?"

A long linen coat, for protection from dust on the train."

"And the hat?"

"One of gray felt, with a broad brim—less in style here, I reckon, than in Kansas," explained the Westerner. "Evidently the scoundrel identified me, by those, or took me for some countryman."

"Possibly," Boyd dryly admitted. "What did he say to you?"

"He stated that Dunn & Raddam had just moved into a new office, and that he would show me the way to it, as he was just returning from the bank."

"Were you expected at Dunn & Raddam's office?" demanded Boyd, abruptly.

"Yes. I had written them that I would call at noon to-day."

"Go on."

"The fellow who had stopped me appeared like a gentleman," continued Perry, "and remarked that my letter had been received, and that I was expected. So I had not the slightest suspicion, and readily accompanied him. We took the elevator and came up to this floor, and he appeared to know all about my Western affairs. I'm a farmer out that way, and have made a barrel of money in the past five years."

"Keep to the man, sir," suggested Boyd.

"There's little more to tell," replied Perry grimly. "I followed the fellow to this office, where he quickly thrust me over the threshold. Then I saw that the room was vacant. But I caught only a glimpse of it, and of two men who sprang from behind the open door, for I was struck on the head by the scoundrel back of me. I had

a leather grip in my hand, and was laid out stiff before I could lift a finger."

"A dastardly outrage!" observed the listening physician.

"So 'twas, sir," declared Perry. "Yet it might have been worse. The scoundrel ought to have waited until I got my load. Then they'd have done me out of a clean sixty thousand dollars in government bonds."

"Government bonds!" cried Boyd, scarce above his breath. "Were you about to receive some bonds from Dunn & Raddam?"

"Why, yes. I had written them that——"

But Felix Boyd, with a fiery glow in the depths of his frowning eyes, did not wait to hear more. He leaped to his feet and turned quickly to Coleman, crying, in rapid whispers:

"Bring this man to Dunn's office, Jimmie, as quickly as possible. We are up against the Big Finger again, for a thousand dollars! Lose no time in following me with Perry."

Coleman only nodded, and Boyd hastened from the vacant office and sought that of Dunn & Raddam, on the third floor of the Exchange Building.

The firm was one of the strongest banking and brokerage houses in Wall Street, and long had been on Boyd's list of patrons. The surprise of the senior partner was but natural, therefore, when Mr. Felix Boyd, whose vocation gave a rather serious significance to his unexpected visit, unceremoniously entered Mr. Dunn's private office.

The banker quickly rose from the chair at his desk, exclaiming impulsively:

"Why, hello, Boyd! What brings you here?"

Boyd broke the news considerably.

"I'm seeking a man named John Perry, who arrived from Kansas this morning," he said. "Have you seen him?"

"Seen him—certainly!" said Mr. Dunn. "He left here about two hours ago. I feared that your visit might signify something more serious."

"It is serious enough, Mr. Dunn."

The banker's smile faded like a flash.

"What do you mean, Boyd?" he fairly gasped.

"I mean that Perry, of Kansas, has not been here, Mr. Dunn, and that you probably have been buncoed out of sixty thousand dollars in government bonds."

II.

"Buncoed—out of sixty thousand dollars!"

The Wall Street banker grew nearly as white as his immaculate shirt-front, as he echoed with shaking voice the alarming declaration made by Felix Boyd.

"There appears to be no doubt of it, Mr. Dunn," said Boyd. "You have delivered bonds to that amount to a man supposed to have been John Perry, have you not?"

"Yes, at noon to-day," cried Dunn, in ghastly agitation. "You don't mean that the man was an impostor, and that we have been duped?"

"Precisely that, sir," Boyd abruptly interposed. "But pull yourself together, Mr. Dunn, and let's get at all of the facts without delay. The game is worth a hunt, and I've turned less promising tricks than this, I assure you. Haste may be imperative, and unless—ah! here is Perry now! This way with him, Jimmie; and you, Mr. Dunn, close your office door for a spell. We'll soon get at the bottom facts of this affair."

With Perry comparatively recovered, so nearly so that Dr. French had departed, it took but a short time to convince the banker that Boyd was entirely correct. The latter dispensed with further interest on the part of Detective Akerman and the two policemen, moreover, and admitted only Coleman and the Westerner to the banker's private office.

There the case was more calmly discussed, with the result that light was shed upon certain features concerning which Boyd had been considerably mystified.

It appeared that Perry had gone West nearly a dozen years before, and had settled in Kansas, where, as a farmer, he had accumulated a considerable fortune.

At the time of his departure, years before, the banking-firm had consisted of Macklin, Dunn & Raddam, the former having since retired from the business.

Out of a past friendship existing between Perry and the senior member of the firm at that time, Perry had arranged with the bankers to receive deposits from him from time to time, and to place the funds for him in safe investments. These relations had been maintained after the retirement of Mr. Macklin, some six years before, until Perry's deposit with the bankers amounted to nearly seventy thousand dollars, against which he never had had occasion to draw.

Coming East for the first time after ten years, however, Perry had decided to convert most of the funds into government bonds, and take them home with him. He so had written the firm, stating precisely when he would call for the bonds, and requesting that they might be ready for immediate delivery in order that he might continue his journey east by an early train, to visit a brother living in Boston.

Dunn & Raddam had received his letter several days before, and naturally planned to comply with his restrictions. The bonds had been ready for delivery since the previous day, and the possibility of fraud had not once been thought of. Perry's writing and signature were perfectly familiar to the bankers, and his letter was assumed to be entirely genuine.

Yet the case presented one curious feature, which at once appealed to Felix Boyd. Neither member of the existing firm was personally acquainted with Perry, his arrangements having been made with the senior member years before.

The advance letter of instructions, however, together with the prompt arrival and general appearance of the stranger to whom the bonds had been delivered, had been deemed sufficient identification. In remarking upon this, Mr. Dunn expressed himself quite flatly.

"An idea that the man was not Perry not once occurred to me," he declared. "He spoke familiarly of our business relations, was clad like a Westerner, and carried a well-worn leather grip bearing Perry's initials. Had it occurred to me to distrust him, I think I should have dismissed the idea as absurd."

"That is because you were up against a very clever

man, Mr. Dunn," said Felix Boyd, now feeling that he had a grip on most of the superficial features of the case. "If we are to throw him down and recover your bonds, we must lose no time in getting about it. Let me see the letter you received from Mr. Perry, the one containing his instructions."

The banker hastened to the outer office to get the letter, only to return after several moments with the information that it was mysteriously missing from the files.

"Missing!" exclaimed Boyd sharply. "Do you suspect any person in your office of having stolen it?"

"I do not."

"Do you know who had it last?"

"To tell the truth, Boyd," the banker bitterly admitted, "I fear that I am to blame for this."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this," Dunn went on to explain, "It has occurred to me that I had Perry's letter in my hand day before yesterday, after giving one of my clerks the necessary instructions relating to it. While I was so engaged, I was suddenly called down to the floor of the Exchange by my partner, Mr. Raddam."

"Did you take the letter with you?"

"Now that the matter has been brought up so seriously," replied Dunn, "I distinctly remember thrusting Perry's letter into the side pocket of my coat, just as I was hastening down-stairs. I did not happen to think of it again, the business relating to it having been adjusted; but I now feel quite sure that I must have lost it, or that it was stolen from my pocket."

"Much more likely lost than stolen," said Boyd bluntly. "Thieves do not trouble themselves to steal letters of which they know nothing."

"That's true."

"You now have made the affair plain enough," added Boyd, a bit censoriously. "You dropped the letter from your pocket, and some knave found it, and has made the most of it."

"And done us out of sixty thousand dollars!" groaned the banker.

"I'm not so sure of that, yet it looks very much like it,"

Boyd hurriedly rejoined. "Did you take a receipt for the bonds delivered this morning?"

"Certainly."

"Let me see it. While he is bringing it, Mr. Perry, just write your name on this block of paper."

The man from Kansas hastened to comply, and when the banker presently returned with his cashier's receipt-book, Boyd carefully compared the two signatures.

"Humph!" he muttered, reverting to Coleman. "Evidently a forgery, Jimmie, yet a very good one."

"Almost a facsimile," murmured the central office man.

"Was your letter written and signed with a pen, Mr. Perry?"

"It was, sir. I wrote it at a hotel in Chicago, where I remained for several days."

"State as precisely as you can what it contained."

"It was only brief," replied the Westerner. "I wrote that I wished sixty thousand dollars of my account converted into government bonds, as I desired to take them with me to Kansas. I stated that I should arrive in New York this morning, and would call here at noon for the bonds. I requested that they might be ready for immediate delivery, as I wished to continue east at three o'clock to visit a brother in Boston."

"You think that was all?"

"I think that covers the entire letter, Mr. Boyd."

"It was quite enough, too, to have given these scoundrels a cue to the possibilities presented," growled Boyd. "With the lost letter in their possession and ample time in which to become familiar with your signature, the job was comparatively easy."

"Yet there were dangers that——" began the banker.

"Faugh!" interrupted Boyd contemptuously. "The knaves who did this job never shrink from danger, not such danger as this episode invited. The scheme was simple enough. Perry was waylaid, lured into a vacant office, a key to which the scoundrels had manufactured, and there he was easily put down and out."

"Not easily in one sense," observed Perry.

"That occurred about half-past eleven," continued Boyd, not heeding the remark. "The knaves then had

ample time to go through Perry's pockets and secure anything that would serve for the purpose of identification."

"I had several letters, sir, and a watch with my initials on it. All of them were taken."

"Yes, of course," nodded Boyd grimly. "For one of them to slip into your coat and hat, and repair to this office with your grip and successfully impersonate you—pshaw! there was no danger whatsoever. This was but child's play for the gang at work here below the deadline."

"It's the work of the Big Finger and his gang, there's no doubt about that," declared Coleman.

"None whatever, Jimmie."

"But can you get no trace of them, Boyd?" pleaded Dunn, in tones of despair. "While it will not cripple us financially, we can ill afford to lose such a sum, to say nothing of being swindled in this outrageous fashion. If the help of the police——"

"No police in mine, Mr. Dunn, if you please," interrupted Boyd decisively. "Nor a move of any kind until I advise it."

"But your contract with us——"

"I know all about our contract, sir, and shall do all in my power to execute my part of it," Boyd curtly interposed. "Now wait one moment, sir."

The moment proved to be several, while Boyd sat staring grimly at the two signatures lying upon the table near-by, with his lips compressed and his brows knit in thought.

Presently he looked up, and asked:

"Did either you or Mr. Raddam meet Perry years ago?"

"Neither of us," replied the banker. "His business was adjusted at that time with Mr. Macklin."

"Macklin and I were old friends, sir," put in Perry.

"How long ago did Macklin retire from your firm, Mr. Dunn?"

The banker hesitated thoughtfully for a moment, then replied simply:

"About six years, I think."

"That's all, Mr. Dunn," said Boyd, abruptly rising.

"As for you, Mr. Perry, you had better remain in New

York for a day or two, or until you hear from me. We may need you to identify these scoundrels."

"That implies, Boyd, that you have struck some clue," cried Dunn, with irrepressible eagerness.

"Say rather that I hope to strike one," returned Boyd, with a brusqueness characteristic of him when at work on a case. "I'll see you gentlemen to-morrow. Come with me, Jimmie. Time flies."

III.

Very few persons, however familiar with the facts brought to the notice of Mr. Felix Boyd, would have discovered in them anything at all encouraging. Even his friend of the central office, despite the fact that Coleman was possessed of keen discernment and had had years of experience, found himself utterly baffled when he strove to find one promising clue amid the circumstances.

The robbery had been so cleverly planned and deliberately executed, the actual identity of the criminals was so uncertain, despite the descriptions obtained, and the interval so long since the escape of the thieves, that Coleman really could see no way by which to light upon the scoundrels, save those of weary watching and indefinite hounding ordinarily adopted at the central office.

Mr. Felix Boyd, however, rarely operated along the lines of the ordinary detective. Until his analysis of a case warranted one bold move by which he could feel sure of success, Boyd invariably displayed no active interest in the affair. Once he felt assured, however, no man of the force ever struck more quickly or boldly.

Jimmie Coleman was very well aware of these characteristics, yet he could not believe that Boyd already had formed a definite opinion of the case, or resolved upon any decided plan. As they left the office of Dunn & Raddam, therefore, he casually remarked:

"A deucedly unpromising case, Felix, eh?"

Boyd glanced sharply about the corridor before he replied, making sure that no eye was upon them. Then he quietly replied:

"Not at all, Jimmie."

"What!"

"It's as simple as two times two. The outlook is perfect."

"The devil you say!"

"Careful, dear fellow! The walls may have ears, or the next corner conceal a spy."

"You think you may be watched?"

"Possibly. You know the Big Finger."

"Will you explain if I go to your office?"

"You are not to go there," murmured Boyd, with eyes constantly alert as the two men descended the stairs. "I have other plans, Jimmie."

"Namely?"

"Take my instructions quickly, for we must part at the sidewalk," Boyd now whispered hurriedly. "I wish you and Detective Akerman to meet me in Gibson's saloon, in Harlem, at five o'clock. Do you know the place?"

"Very well."

"Leave the central office separately, Jimmie, both of you in disguise, and rejoin one another in Harlem. Then wait in Gibson's back room until I come. Are you on?"

"Surely."

"Have a brace of guns with you, for we may need them."

"Trust me for that, Felix."

"Slip away, now, and display no haste in going to headquarters," added Boyd, significantly. "I'll rejoin you at Gibson's at five o'clock sharp."

Coleman merely nodded, and the two men parted the moment they reached the sidewalk.

Boyd proceeded down Wall Street, walked at a moderate pace, and returned to his office.

He was convinced, by the clever character of the robbery committed that morning, that it could have been devised and executed only by the crafty gang then operating below the dead-line, directed by that master knave who so long had evaded his most artful and strenuous efforts to corner him, that obscure criminal chief known only as the Big Finger.

That the latter seriously feared him, moreover, and invariably had him under espionage when engaged in any

of his infamous operations, Boyd had learned from repeated experiences; yet, as he returned to his office in Pine Street, he could discover no sign of a shadow upon his movements, despite an instinctive conviction that he was being constantly watched.

Boyd governed himself accordingly, with a view to blinding any spy to the fact that he already was actuated by a definite theory concerning the robbery, thus imparting to the thieves an assurance that they might safely take any immediate steps desired. Of what their first step would consist, Boyd felt comparatively sure—so sure that he was about to bank heavily upon his conviction.

He remained in his office until four o'clock, then went to his home, in Fifty-ninth Street. There he telephoned for a physician, who called half-an-hour later, and remained about ten minutes. At half-past four, the dusk of the November afternoon began to fall, and the curtains of Boyd's chamber on the second floor front were drawn, and the room lighted. Next Boyd summoned his butler and gave him his instructions.

At six o'clock, the light in Boyd's chamber was extinguished. At a quarter before seven his door-bell rang, and the butler responded. A man on the front steps courteously inquired:

Is Mr. Boyd at home? Can I see him for a moment?"

The butler shook his head doubtfully.

"I fear not, sir, to-night," said he. "Mr. Boyd was taken with a severe chill early this evening, and his physician has ordered him to bed. Is your business of serious importance? If so, I will speak to him."

"Not particularly," was the reply, after a moment. "I wanted to ask after a certain party for whom I am seeking. I will call again in the morning."

The butler bowed respectfully and closed the door.

So much for the reliability of Mr. Felix Boyd's intuitive conviction.

Long before this little episode, however, Boyd had departed in disguise from the rear door of his dwelling, and hastened to keep his appointment in Harlem. From Harlem, accompanied by Coleman and Detective Akerman, Boyd proceeded to Fordham, where the trio arrived soon after six o'clock.

It then was dark, with the sky heavily clouded, and only the street lights of the suburban town to relieve the gloom of the November night.

Discreetly keeping in advance of his companions, Boyd sought one of the rather secluded avenues of the quiet town, and presently approached his destination—a residence near the western end of the street.

It was quite an imposing dwelling of wood, with broad verandas, and a large stable at the rear, the two occupying a considerable estate well covered with handsome shade trees, the leafless branches of which were sighing dismally in the night wind, as if in gloomy appreciation of coming events.

The place was somewhat isolated, and appeared a bit run down, as if the owner now lacked the opulence of bygone days. The house stood fifty yards back from the street, but upon a glass pane over the outer door of the brightly lighted vestibule the name of the occupant was printed in letters of considerable size, presumably to obviate the need of traversing the long gravel walk to ascertain who dwelt there.

The name thus easily read from the street gate was "Macklin."

With characteristic reserve up to this time, Boyd had confided none of his suspicions to either of his companions. The moment Coleman observed above the distant door, however, the name of the whilom senior member of the Wall Street banking-house, he began to see the shrewd theory by which Boyd evidently was actuated.

"By Jove! Felix, you suspect Macklin of having had a hand in that robbery!" he quietly exclaimed, as he and Akerman joined Boyd near the front gate.

The latter was intently studying the suburban dwelling, as well as the distance and darkness permitted, and measuring the possibilities offered by the gloom of the surrounding grounds.

"I know that he had a hand in it, Jimmie," he quietly rejoined, after a moment.

"The devil he did!" muttered Akerman, by way of protest. "That's not very likely, Mr. Boyd. I cannot swallow that."

"Cough it up, then, and reject it," said Boyd, laughing softly.

"But why are you so sure of it?"

"It will not be wise to discuss the matter here," replied Boyd, glancing sharply about. "Vault the fence, and follow me back of yonder shrubbery. There we may watch without being discovered. Now having Macklin's house under our eye, we may safely await developments."

"But why are you convinced of his guilt?" persisted Akerman, when the three had gained the concealment mentioned.

"The case is as simple as two times two, as I told Jimmie," Boyd now proceeded to explain, in subdued tones. "The character of the job alone convinces me that it's the work of the Big Finger."

"But he cannot have induced Macklin to join his gang," protested Akerman. "Macklin stands ace high in the community."

"High or low," replied Boyd decisively; "you may take my word that Macklin had a hand in this job. He is the one and only man who could make the job possible. I saw that from the outset."

"Why so, Felix," inquired Coleman. "I'm blessed if I plainly see the point you appear to make."

"Follow my deductions, Jimmie, and you will see it," replied Boyd. "The letter lost by Dunn evidently was found by the Big Finger, or by one of his gang."

"Admitting that—what then?"

"The possibility presented by the letter was at once obvious, and one to be eagerly taken advantage of by this gang," continued Boyd significantly.

"There's no doubt of that."

"Yet, according to Perry's statement, the letter contained only brief instructions relating to his business with Dunn & Raddam. Plainly, however, the party who impersonated Perry and secured the bonds this morning knew very much more about the latter than was imparted by the lost letter."

"By Jove! that's true."

"We are informed, furthermore, that Perry has been away from New York for more than ten years, and that only Macklin of the old firm knew him personally."

Hence neither Dunn nor Raddam could identify him when he called to get the bonds. Obviously, Jimmie, this very important fact could have been imparted to the thieves, as well as their other information concerning Perry, by one man only—the former senior member of the firm.”

“By gracious! Boyd, there’s a deal of truth in that,” declared Akerman. “It does, indeed, look as if Macklin had gone over the traces.”

“Follow me a step farther, and you will see why I am convinced of it,” continued Boyd. “Unless perfectly satisfied that Perry was not personally known to Dunn & Raddam, no sane men would even have thought of attempting this robbery. That they were thus assured appears in the fact that they laid all of their plans with perfect confidence.”

“So they did, Felix.”

“They located a vacant office, provided themselves with a key to it, and one of them watched to waylay Perry when he entered the building this morning. Since they cannot have known by what train he would arrive, it is perfectly safe to assume that some person who could identify him was at hand to point him out when he approached the Exchange Building, and the one and only man who can have done this, which was absolutely necessary to the success of the scheme, was again—Macklin.”

“There is no getting away from that reasoning, Mr. Boyd,” admitted Akerman. “I now believe you are right, sir, and that Macklin has gone wrong.”

“Many a man has gone wrong for a share in sixty thousand dollars,” rejoined Boyd. “It appears plain that the finder of Perry’s letter knew Macklin to be a retired member of the firm, and that he ventured approaching him with the scheme to secure the bonds. It probably was represented to Macklin that he would incur no danger of detection, and he yielded to the temptation. We may learn positively a little later.”

“But what are your designs upon Macklin, that you have come out here to-night?” inquired Coleman curiously.

“My designs are not upon Macklin alone.”

“No?”

"I am after the master, Jimmie, more than after the hireling," said Boyd, with grim asperity. "It's odds that no settlement has yet been made with Macklin, who doubtless is to receive part of the stolen bonds. As the knaves will wish to turn them into money as soon as possible, a settlement with Macklin will be made without needless delay."

"There is something in that."

"I believe it may be attempted this very night."

"It's not improbable," admitted Coleman. "In dealing with such knaves Macklin naturally would want his share of the plunder promptly."

"That's just the point, Jimmie."

"He may have an appointment to see the gang at their headquarters."

"In that case we must shadow him," replied Boyd. "I hardly think, however, that the Big Finger will trust Macklin to that extent. The chances would be too great."

"You think he will come here?"

"That is more probable, Jimmie. If they feel sure that we have hit upon no theory incriminating Macklin, which might lead to our watching this house, some of the gang, if not the Big Finger himself, may venture here to wind up the business."

"Haven't you taken long chances, then? They may have been watching you."

Boyd laughed, softly.

"I hope so, Jimmie, and rather suspect it," said he. "I have taken steps to relieve them of any apprehensions concerning my movements, and I'm inclined to think that one or more of them will show up here to-night."

"Do you know that Macklin is now at home?"

"I will go and make sure of it. You two wait here until I return."

"Go ahead."

Boyd stole across the intervening grounds, and cautiously approached the house. The hall and several of the lower rooms were brightly lighted, but the curtains at all of the windows were closely drawn. Not until he discovered a deep conservatory joined to the west side of the house did Boyd accomplish his object. Through the glass

wall a partly open door was discernible, left open that the warmth of the dwelling might reach the conservatory.

Through this door and a side hall Boyd could see into the library beyond, where an elderly man sat reading a newspaper, while a woman near-by was nodding in her chair.

"Macklin and his wife," thought Boyd, briefly watching them. "He has aged since he retired from business. I have heard that he has lost heavily in the market, which may have led him to venture this transgression."

Having located his man, Boyd proceeded to make a further examination of the conservatory, and presently discovered an outer door. Carefully trying it, he found it secured with a bolt within. Next he quietly tested several of the small glass panes near the casing of the door, and found that the putty securing them had fallen away in places. Working quietly with his knife, he presently succeeded in removing one of them, when he found that he easily could thrust in his arm and shoot the bolt of the conservatory door.

"So far, so good!" he grimly muttered. "Now to await developments."

Leaving the door bolted as he had found it, he cautiously retraced his steps, and rejoined the waiting detectives.

For more than two hours, in the solitude and gloom of the quiet park, amid a silence broken only by the sighing of the night wind through the leafless trees, Boyd and the detectives patiently watched and waited.

In the far distance the bell on a local church struck nine o'clock, whereupon Akerman muttered, a bit impatiently:

"It's about time that something was doing, isn't it, Boyd?"

"Not quite yet," said Boyd, with grave assurance. "Not before the servants have gone up to bed. Ah! there now are signs of that."

The lamp in the kitchen had been extinguished, and presently lights appeared in two of the upper rooms, and in one of the front chambers. Soon only the latter remained, and those in the hall and library; and Boyd then

advised seeking a concealment nearer the house, within better view of the front door and vestibule.

Ten minutes later a move by Macklin plainly indicated that Felix Boyd was on the right track. He came out to the vestibule, and for several minutes stood peering anxiously toward the deserted street, then slowly returned and quietly closed the front door.

"Ah! that's a good sign, boys," murmured Boyd complacently. "He is alone down-stairs, and now expects visitors. We soon shall have business that will dispel the chill of this night air and warm our blood with its——"

"Easy, Felix!" whispered Coleman suddenly. "There are two men at the front gate."

"Right you are, Jimmie! Our men, too, for a thousand! Lay low until they have entered."

"They are coming up the walk."

"Aha! and well do I know that figure!" Boyd triumphantly whispered.

"The Big Finger himself?"

"None other, Jimmie! The same man I thrice have encountered, only to lose him each time by a stroke of ill luck, and ah—ah! the other is Ranney, one of his chief minions! I saw him that night in their subterranean stronghold. By Jove! we soon should have our quarry well cornered."

"Why not nail them at once?" growled Akerman, under his breath.

"Hush! Not on your life!" whispered Boyd decisively. "Wait a bit, I say, until they have entered."

Meantime, while these subdued remarks were made, the two men had briskly approached the house, as if bent on legitimate business only, and had entered the vestibule. There the light from within revealed them more plainly, the imposing and powerful figure quickly recognized by Felix Boyd, also that of a smaller man, with a leather grip hung with a strap over his shoulder.

"That's Perry's grip, or I'm a liar!" muttered Coleman.

"Let's hope that all of Perry's bonds are in it, as well," Boyd grimly muttered. "Ah! they rap on the pane, instead of ringing. So, so, and Macklin promptly responds.

Cut and dried, eh? Now they are in, and our work must begin."

"Why the devil didn't we collar them at once?" he growled, half angrily. "This putting off their arrest may result in——"

"In our recovering all of the stolen bonds, rather than only a part of them," Boyd curtly interrupted, with a resentful flash of his determined eyes. "You should have head enough to see that, Akerman."

"What do you mean?"

"If they have brought only Macklin's share of the bonds, we may lose the remainder by arresting these scoundrels immediately. Unless they have all of the bonds with them, they must be shadowed instead of arrested."

"Sure enough! I had not thought of that."

"Hark you, now, and follow my instructions to the letter," added Boyd, in hurried whispers. "I am going into that house by the way described. I think I can contrive to overhear their interview, and discover whether they have all of the bonds. If they have I will not rejoin you again, but will remain to arrest Macklin, leaving you to secure the others the moment they emerge from the house."

"Trust us to do that, Felix," nodded Coleman.

"On the other hand, in case they have brought only Macklin's share of the plunder," added Boyd, "I will rejoin you here, and together we'll shadow the couple to their headquarters and there round them up. Macklin may then be secured later. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," declared Coleman. "If you do not rejoin us before the two come out, we are to arrest them at once."

"Exactly! And use your guns, Jimmie, if necessary."

"Humph! No need to add that."

Leaving the detectives to steal within easy reach of the vestibule door, Boyd hastened around the house and approached the conservatory. There he discovered Macklin and his visitors seated at the library table, on which Ranney had placed the leather grip, still unopened. The three men evidently were engaged in subdued conversation, and Boyd lost no time in effecting an entrance.

Drawing his revolver, Boyd stole into the side hall and concealed himself under a stairway, the better to overhear the subdued voices of the men in the library. The first words that reached his ears related to himself.

"Oh! we'd not have ventured here, Macklin, had I not been sure that you are not suspected, and that the infernal genius of Felix Boyd has proved unequal to this affair," declared the knave known as the Big Finger.

"He's sick at home, Macklin," Ranney added; "knocked out with a chill. I've been there to inquire. You need have no fear, old man."

"Are you sure of it—sure of it?" Macklin hoarsely repeated, in accents of piteous agitation. "God help me, I should die if the truth were known! I have done this only to retrieve my lost fortune. God above, sirs, I have lived like a man in a dream, in a nightmare, since first you broached the project to me, since I first consented to have a hand in it. Exposure will kill me, if it——"

"Bah!" growled the Big Finger. "There will be no exposure, save that you betray yourself. You can trust us to keep our traps closed. So let your mind rest easy, old man, and quit your shivering. You did your part as agreed, and we're here to do ours."

"The bonds—you have brought them?" demanded Macklin, with an eagerness greater even than his fears.

"The entire batch, Macklin, that you may see that you get your proper share," was the reply, with an honesty worthy a better cause. "They are there in Perry's grip, just as we brought them from Dunn & Raddam's office. Open them up, Ranney, and give him all that's coming to him. Then the sooner we're away, the better."

"Yes, yes, the sooner the better," echoed Macklin, nervously.

"It will take but a minute, old man," cried Ranney, hastening to produce the bonds. "Sixty thousand in all, old man."

"That's right—just the amount mentioned in the letter."

"And you are to receive one-third."

"That's right, too."

"Place them at one side, Ranney, whichever denomination he prefers."

"Any of them will do—any of them, sir," cried Macklin, shaking from head to foot with nervous excitement. "God above, I never dreamed that I should come to this!"

"You are nearly due for something worse, poor devil," thought Boyd, as he watched the allotment hurriedly made, and then saw Ranney thrust the balance of the bonds back into the grip and close it.

It no sooner was done than the Big Finger rose abruptly to his feet, saying:

"We'll be off at once, Ranney. Shake hands, old man, for this is the last you'll ever see of us, or we of you. Secrecy and expedition are always wise in affairs of this kind, Macklin, and this interview winds up the whole business."

"I hope it does, sir, indeed I do," Macklin fervently rejoined, as he forced a smile to his ghastly face while he shook the criminal's hand.

"You still look after the grip, Ranney. I don't want the care of that."

"Leave it to me, then."

"And you, Macklin, get your plunder out of sight. Never mind seeing us to the door. We'll find our way out. You get your blunt under cover."

The speaker, always a ruffian and a desperado despite his rare craft and vicious abilities, strode abruptly into the hall, with Ranney at his heels, and hastened toward the front door of the house.

To Macklin, whose arrest was of secondary importance, Felix Boyd paid no immediate attention. Revolver in hand, with his resolute features grimly set, he stole quickly through the side hall and reached that leading to the outer door, bent upon lending a hand to Coleman and his companion.

Once more, however, just as the clever work of Felix Boyd approached its culmination, just as the arrest of this arch-criminal chief appeared all but inevitable—once more Satan served his own.

The succor came in a most unexpected form, and from an entirely unexpected quarter. As the two criminals strode through the hall, Macklin's one male servant, who had been out during the evening, came hurrying across the grounds from a side gate, accompanied by a

bulldog. As they rounded the corner of the house, the dog caught sight of Akerman and Jimmie Coleman, crouching with drawn weapons at either side of the vestibule door.

With a yelp that fairly split the still night air, the animal instantly leaped at the nearer of the two, and fastened his teeth in the calf of Akerman's leg. The detective vented one irrepressible shriek, a cry that completely drowned the furious snarling of the dog, and leaped involuntarily from his concealment.

At the same moment the criminal chief opened the inner door of the vestibule and beheld him, and the figure of Coleman dashing up the steps. He uttered only two words, as he closed the door with a violence that threatened its hinges.

"Bolt, Ranney!"

Ranney turned like a flash to dart back through the hall, only to behold Felix Boyd some twenty feet away, and the gleam of his leveled weapon.

"By God, we're cornered!" he yelled, above the commands that thundered from Boyd's lips as he approached.

"Not on your life!"

"Up with your hands, or I'll fire!" roared Boyd, for the second time.

The face of the criminal chief, though white as the linen at his throat, had turned hard as flint, a picture of utter desperation. With a leap like that of a leopard, he darted back of Ranney and instantly vanished into the dark parlor adjoining the hall.

Boyd fired the moment the reckless scoundrel moved, but he had in mind, too, the imminent danger of shooting Coleman, who stood nearly in range and was furiously battering to fragments the glass pane of the front door. Under these conflicting conditions it was not strange that Boyd missed the mark intended.

Ranney, however, as the report went ringing through the house, threw up both hands with a single wild cry and pitched face forward to the floor, shot through the breast.

Boyd instantly sprang over him and dashed into the parlor. In one of the shattered windows a chair still hung swaying from the sill. The Big Finger, the one man whom Boyd would have given all to have taken, had

beaten out both panes and sashes, and had vanished in the gloom of the November night.

* * * * *

"The bonds—yes, Jimmie, it's true that we recovered them. It's true that we turned Ranney down, and have sent poor, misguided Mackilin up the river for a term of years. It's true that I have fulfilled to the letter my contract with Dunn & Raddam, and have only their unqualified approval. It is true that my measure of the case was absolutely correct—yet, alas! to me it has only the aspect of a dismal failure."

Coleman laughed, upon hearing these comments of Felix Boyd nearly a week later, and knocked the ashes from his cigar.

"Bosh!" said he bluntly. "You take it too much to heart, that curiously lucky escape of the Big Finger. It was no fault of yours, nor any of us. Who the devil could have foreseen that that infernal bulldog would show up at just that moment and fasten to Akerman's leg? In ten more seconds, Felix, we'd have had wristers on both of the scoundrels."

"That's true enough, Jimmie, yet only the lamentable failure remains."

"Not that alone," growled Coleman shortly. "One other fact remains."

"What's that, Jimmie?"

"That we still are in the ring, Felix, and good for another battle."

Boyd laughed deeply, and nodded much less grimly.

"That's true, Jimmie, dear fellow," said he. "Next time, too, it may have a different finish."

"I would wager that it will, Felix."

"Let us hope so," smiled Boyd. "If not, Jimmie, it shall be through no fault of mine. Is Akerman about again?"

"He is out on a lame peg," laughed the central office man. "Really, Felix, Akerman finds only one solace in that whole affair."

"What solace is that, Jimmie?"

"He shot the dog."

The Case of the Convict Code.

I.

Jimmie Coleman, the central office man, laughed loudly as he dumped the contents of a brown paper parcel upon the office table of Mr. Felix Boyd.

"No, it's not a birthday present for you, Felix," he genially rejoined, in response to a quizzical inquiry from his hearer. "These don't look much like it, eh?"

"Not very much, Jimmie, for a fact," smiled Boyd, drawing up his chair and curiously surveying the odd lot of rubbish exposed to his view.

It consisted chiefly of old cigarette-boxes, scraps of pasteboard from broken candy-packages, crumpled portions of paper bags, parts of newspaper wrappers and soiled envelopes, a few leaves from a small calendar, several strips cut from the border edges of newspapers and magazines—the entire lot looking much like a collection from some old refuse barrel.

The central office man, with the parcel under his arm, had entered the Pine Street office of Mr. Felix Boyd only a few minutes before, and just as Boyd was lighting his pipe after returning from his midday lunch.

It was a day in September, by the way, and precisely four months subsequent to that on which had occurred the startling burglary of the great Southern Trust and Insurance Company, a crime made memorable by the vast sum secured by the burglars, amounting to nearly half-a-million dollars in bonds and negotiable securities. Despite the fact that one of the thieves, the notorious Bud Rafferty, had since been caught and convicted, not a trace of the stolen property could be obtained, nor any clue leading to the identification and arrest of Rafferty's confederates.

Yet negotiations with the convict, with a view to re-

covering some of the stolen property, had repeatedly been tried by the authorities since his incarceration at Sing Sing, and many inviting offers had been made him, all of which had been scornfully rejected by Rafferty, whose grim loyalty to his confederates was said to be entirely in accord with his resentful and desperate character.

At the time of the great burglary, which had occurred the previous May, many comments were made reflecting upon the judgments of the trust company directors for not having availed themselves of the services of Mr. Felix Boyd, whose secret work and constant vigilance below the dead-line had averted numerous similar crimes. These comments came chiefly from Boyd's own clients, however, who alone were in a position to appreciate his extraordinary talents and peculiarly effective methods.

The victimized company not being among his clients, Boyd had felt only a cursory interest in the crime. This indifference was accentuated, moreover, by the fact that certain details of the burglary, incidentally brought to his notice by Jimmie Coleman, convinced him that the job was not the work of the organized gang of crooks which long had been operating below the dead-line, directed by that obscure master criminal known only to Boyd by the name of the Big Finger.

This powerful gang had given Boyd no end of serious trouble, and its extermination finally had become so imperative to the safety of the great financial interest served by him that Boyd was now resolved to hazard almost any desperate move that presented even a visionary promise of success. That any advantage in this direction was to be derived from the curious contents of Jimmie Coleman's brown paper parcel, however, did not then enter the mind of Felix Boyd.

"Where did you get this lot of trash, Jimmie?" he inquired.

"Up the river," replied Coleman sententiously, as he drew up a chair to the table.

"Sing Sing?"

"Exactly."

"What about it, Jimmie?"

"Have a look," said Coleman, tendering one of the

scraps of pasteboard, the side of a broken cigarette-box. "Do you find nothing worthy of note?"

"Ah! I see!" Boyd exclaimed. "It is curiously marked with fine pencil lines, so inscribed as to attract no serious attention. This might be a brief communication, Jimmie, in cipher, or a secret code."

"That's precisely what it is, Felix, and you'll find all of this rubbish similarly marked."

"How came it in your possession?" asked Boyd, with indifferent interest. "Did you bring it down from the penitentiary?"

"Exactly," nodded Coleman. "I went up there to deliver a prisoner this morning, and when coming away I observed Burrage, one of the deputy wardens, racking his thinking-machine over one of these scraps of paper. A few inquiries elicited some rather startling disclosures, and brought this lot of truck from a drawer in his desk."

"What were his disclosures, Jimmie?"

"For some weeks, Felix, one of the convicts up there has been frequently receiving parcels and papers, cigarettes, candy and the like, ostensibly from a woman he is engaged to marry after his release. Under the rules of the institution, all such packages are carefully examined before delivery to the prisoners."

"Ah, I see," remarked Boyd. "Burrage finally observed that all of the articles sent to the convict mentioned bore these fine pencil lines."

"He first discovered them on the outer edge of a cigarette-box," replied Coleman. "As you'll observe, they are not of a character to attract much attention, and Burrage at first thought they had been idly or aimlessly made. Quiet investigation, however, revealed that each article subsequently addressed to this particular convict bore, in some obscure corner, a few of these same peculiar marks."

"That settles it, Jimmie. He is in secret communication with the woman mentioned."

"So Burrage then decided," continued Coleman. "He did not, however, reveal his suspicions to the convict. On the contrary, he continued to deliver the parcels, and afterward contrived at times to secretly remove from the convict's cell some portions of the—well, call it the convict code."

"Quite a proper name, Jimmie, I'm sure."

"There is the result," added Coleman, with a glance at the littered table. "But Burrage, after a month of quiet work upon these odds and ends, confesses himself baffled. He can make no head or tail to this secret code, if such it is, and stated to me that he next should make charges against the convict, and attempt to force him into confessing the whole business."

"Has he done so," demanded Boyd abruptly.

"Not yet."

"It would be a foolish move, Jimmie, and serve only to end the secret correspondence," said Boyd decisively. "Better far interpret these communications, if possible, and discover their design. It looks as if a plot of some kind was being formed, and immediate advantage should be taken of these things to learn of what it consists, and to round up the offenders."

Coleman laughed and nodded.

"That's what I told Burrage," said he. "I also told him that you were the very man to undertake the job, and he readily consented to disclose nothing at present, and to let you examine these articles."

"Not a bad plan, perhaps."

"Other reasons, Felix, of special interest to you, led me to propose it," added Coleman, with dry significance.

"What do you mean, Jimmie?"

"Burrage has discovered that our old acquaintance, Jessie Dole, was the sender of these missives."

"The dickens!"

"And the convict who received them was none other than Paul Wykoff, sent up by you for the Trinity Trust burglary."

"Both members of the Big Finger's gang!" cried Boyd excitedly. "By Jove! Jimmie, there may be more for us in this than appears on the surface. It may provide the very clue I long have been seeking."

"So I surmised, Felix."

"I would give half I possess to land just once more in the stronghold of that scoundrel and his gang," cried Boyd, with augmented feeling. "If I ever do, and he again escapes me, I'll throw up my vocation."

"Oh, no, you'll not, Felix," laughed Coleman, amused

at Boyd's momentary display of bitterness. "You'll never quit till you have landed the Big Finger behind prison bars, I'll go my pile on that."

"Well, probably not, Jimmie, after all."

"He's no ordinary knave, or you'd have landed him long ago, and well he knows it. He would give as much to down you, Felix, as you'd sacrifice to land him."

"Very likely."

"So have a care, dear fellow, or you may be treated to a knife thrust in the back. He is capable of it, you know."

"Indeed, I do, Jimmie, and I'm never without an eye open," Boyd pointedly rejoined. "Now let's see what we can make of these hen's tracks. I'll get at their meaning, Jimmie, if it takes a leg."

With which grim observation he drew the scraps of paper and pasteboard toward him, and fell to studying the curious cipher with which they were inscribed.

The central office man lighted a cigar, and for nearly half-an-hour sat silently watching the changing expressions of Boyd's forceful, clean-cut face. Then he ventured to ask:

"What do you make of it, Felix?"

Boyd looked up sharply, much as if he had forgotten the speaker was present.

"Can't say yet," he growled, a bit impatiently. "It's a secret cipher, however, and I never yet saw one I could not interpret. I don't believe that this will floor me. What's the hour?"

"Two o'clock."

"Where can I meet you at six?"

"You say."

"At the central office, then," said Boyd bluntly. "I must be alone here, Jimmie, so get out. I want precisely four hours in which to decipher these scrawls, and I'll see you again at six. Away with you, I say! I must be alone!"

Coleman nodded agreeably and withdrew, smiling broadly when he heard Felix Boyd lock the office door behind him. He knew well what it signified—four hours of solitude and study, of brain-racking application that could endure no interruption, a period of mental concen-

tration so strained and intense that Boyd would emerge from it in a state approaching physical collapse and utter enervation. Not, however, until the desired end had been attained.

That these impressions on the part of Jimmie Coleman were entirely reliable appeared in the altered aspect of Felix Boyd when he left his office at a quarter after six. His collar was wet and wilted, his tie awry, his features pale and drawn, his lips compressed, his hair disordered and his brows darkly knit—but the restless fire in his dilated eyes was that of mingled triumph and grim determination. As he emerged into Pine Street, he still was intensely absorbed, and oblivious to all observers.

The moment Boyd appeared upon the street a man in an opposite doorway quickly drew back from view, then stole forth furtively to watch him. The same man shadowed Coleman to Boyd's office nearly five hours before, had seen him enter and depart, and, since, had patiently lingered to await Boyd's departure. Plainly enough, this man was actuated by some definite design, and bent upon learning all that was in the wind.

If Boyd had chanced to observe this man, he would have needed no introduction. Despite the stained goggles hiding the cold gleam of his malevolent eyes, there was no mistaking the man's features—his hooked nose, the endowment of a bird of prey; his thin, cruel and determined lips; his square jaw and muscular neck, his slightly bowed yet rugged and powerful figure. To one man only could these belong, the man who, as Jimmie Coleman had implied, would, with most hearty hatred, have stabbed Felix Boyd in the back. To one man only could they belong—the Big Finger himself!

As blind to the movements of this man, however, as to those of the hundreds he passed on his way, Boyd hastened to the central office to rejoin Coleman, whom he encountered on the adjoining sidewalk. The latter suppressed a smile upon observing Boyd's disordered attire, merely remarking bluntly:

"You're half-an-hour late, old man."

Even the voice of Felix Boyd, a harsh, rapid monotone, only reflected his mental state.

"Better a half hour late, with one's efforts crowned with

success, than a half hour early, with naught to report but failure."

"Eureka!" muttered Coleman. "Do you mean that you have——"

"Silence! Not a word at present—not a look! This way, Jimmie! By God! this game is already more desperate than—— Steady! We'll go this way and drop into the Woodcock for dinner. Not had your dinner yet, have you? Have it with me, dear boy. By Jove! yonder's a curious fellow, just ahead of us Jimmie. Looks like a patent medicine ad., fit for a three-sheet poster. Tired of waiting, were you? Faugh! dear fellow, I'll repay you with a bird and a bottle. A booth in the Woodcock, Jimmie, that's our immediate destination. There we can talk it over, as snug as bugs in a rug. Will you hit a cocktail for a starter? No? Heave ahead, then, and we'll dine before dark. Days are growing short, aren't they? Winter'll soon be upon us."

There was something curiously absurd in this protracted digression, begun with a suppressed vehemence bordering upon ferocity, and terminating with a laugh vivid in contrast, the whole business having been rattled off with a volubility that gave Coleman no chance to slip a word in edgewise. The central office man was a bit puzzled; but Felix Boyd had him by the arm and was marching him away all the while, and Coleman knew him far too well to protest, or to venture intruding questions in his companion's obvious state of mind.

Mr. Felix Boyd, however, before they had covered fifty yards, had become as cool as an iced melon, and wore his habitual air of indifference and repose. Maintaining a cursory stream of talk, tommy rot from beginning to end, he conducted Coleman to the Woodcock, in those days a popular restaurant in that locality, where cuisine was of the best.

With never a backward look, Boyd entered with his companion, then glanced sharply at the long row of curtained booths adjoining one wall of the elaborate saloon. Several of the booths were unoccupied, one of which Boyd promptly entered, and drew the curtain. As its folds fell into place, a man on the street peered sharply into the saloon.

It was the man in goggles. With lips maliciously drawing, he noted that an adjoining booth was vacant. Taking no chance of delay, he immediately entered the saloon and slipped into the booth next to that occupied by Felix Boyd and his companion. Having dropped the curtain, he complacently removed his goggles, inscribed an order for a light lunch, and then settled himself within a foot of the drawn curtain of the adjoining booth.

It at once was obvious to him that Felix Boyd had no thought of an eavesdropper, for he was speaking without restraint and in ordinary tones.

"Loose digging, as they say in the Klondike, Jimmie, that's what it was, and I foresaw it would be before you left me," he was remarking, over a sparkling dry Martini. "It took some little time, however, and has given me a racking headache."

"Yet you deciphered the secret missives?" demanded Coleman eagerly.

"Each and every one of them, Jimmie, and transcribed them into plain, unvarnished English. Incomplete and disconnected though they are, and evidently covering several weeks of secret correspondence, they point plainly to a startling and most audacious scheme."

"Have you fathomed it?"

"After a fashion, let me alone for that," nodded Boyd. "Here's to the advantage it offers us, and here's to the speedy downfall of a certain knavish genius by the name of Scanlon. God willing, I'll have him in bracelets this day week!"

The short, muscular fingers of the man in the next booth absently caressed his brawny wrists, much as if he already vaguely sensed the chill of steel around them; and then his thin, cruel lips took on a derisive curl, and the malignant glow in his scowling eyes intensified.

Jimmie Coleman drained his glass, then stared perplexedly at Boyd for a moment.

"Scanlon, did you say?" he demanded. "Who the devil is Scanlon?"

"The devil himself, Jimmie, and that's no lie," said Boyd, with a mirthless laugh.

"Not the—the Big Finger?" gasped Coleman.

"Yes, the Big Finger!"

"His name is Scanlon?"

"Scanlon is his name, Jimmie. Scanlon—or mine is not Felix Boyd."

Did you discover it in the convict code?"

Boyd vented an ominous snarl, and his lowered voice grew more hard and threatening.

"That's not a tithe of what I discovered, Jimmie," he cried. "God willing, I repeat, we'll have the Big Finger and every man of his gang behind prison bars within a week!"

"You amaze me," growled Coleman impatiently. "Explain yourself. Is there some great game afoot?"

"Yes, and one in which I'll have a hand. Are you all ears, Jimmie?"

"Never more near it, Felix; on my word."

Boyd leaned across the table between them, and fell to speaking more rapidly, and with suppressed vehemence.

The man in the next booth strained his ears for each and every word.

"I'll describe the scheme, Jimmie, as well as I could fathom it from the odds and ends you provided," said Boyd. "To begin with, one fact is obvious: Paul Wykoff, who was the right hand of this man Scanlon, the Big Finger, when sent up to Sing Sing months ago, has in some way made friends with that notorious burglar, Bud Rafferty."

"Now doing time for the recent great break."

"Exactly. It further appears that Rafferty, prior to his arrest and conviction, had possession of and secreted most of the bonds and securities stolen from the Southern Trust and Insurance Company. At present Rafferty alone knows where they are hidden, a fact which he has confided to his fellow convict, Wykoff."

"Ah! I see," muttered Coleman grimly. "Are they plotting to remove or secure them?"

"Bigger game, Jimmie, far bigger," declared Boyd forcibly.

"Of what nature?"

"I'll give it to you in a nutshell, as I now size it up," replied Boyd. "Rafferty, as you know, is a desperate ruffian, yet one not easily hoodwinked. He is not a man to confide to others the hiding-place of half-a-million in

bonds. Nevertheless, he would snap eagerly at any scheme enabling him to escape and share the hidden plunder with his liberators."

"No doubt of it, Felix.

"From pointers gleaned from your heap of rubbish," continued Boyd, "it is plain that Wykoff and Rafferty are planning to escape. Furthermore, through the Dole girl, who occasionally visits Wykoff in prison, all of the facts have been imparted to the Big Finger, and his aid enlisted."

"Humph!" grinned Coleman. "Let him alone to tackle any game with half-a-million back of it."

"No doubt the hidden bonds are his chief incentive," admitted Boyd. "Yet he would take long chances, Jimmie, to insure the escape of Paul Wykoff, who was one of the shrewdest and boldest members of his gang."

"That's right, too," growled Coleman thoughtfully. "By Jove! Felix, if we could discover of what their plans consist, and just when they will attempt to execute them——"

"We could execute a counter-move, eh?" interrupted Boyd dryly.

"Precisely."

"Well, Jimmie, their plan is stated in the cipher missives, or enough of it to serve our purpose."

"The devil you say!"

"Don't enthuse too quickly, however," protested Boyd. "The pointers I discovered were meager enough, yet I think I can guess the design. Can you inform me, by the way, whether any of the convicts up there are at present employed along the river front?"

"Yes, a big gang of them daily," cried Coleman quickly. "There's a six-months' job being done on the docks and piers, and I saw a gang of the convicts at work there this morning."

"That convinces me that I am right," said Boyd, with grim satisfaction. "I cannot say just when the escape will be attempted, but probably at a time when both Wykoff and Rafferty are at work on the pier."

"But what is their design?"

"The design is not theirs, Jimmie, but was born in the fertile brain of the Big Finger," Boyd forcibly rejoined.

"It appears in his communications to Wykoff, through the Dole girl, and by means of the secret cipher. He is to await a good opportunity, slip slowly down the river in a swift steam-launch, and at a favorable moment dart quickly toward the pier on which the convicts are at work. Then will come a bolt for freedom by Wykoff and Rafferty, a plunge into the river, a scrambling aboard the launch, and then a swift dash for the opposite shore, and——"

"Break off, laddie!" whispered Coleman sharply. "Here's the waiter with our grub."

"There is time enough for us, Jimmie," said Felix Boyd complacently. "I will outline my counter-move while we eat."

The man in the next booth quietly drew himself up, then reached for the bottle and glass on his table.

"Here's to your counter-move, Mr. Felix Boyd!" he said to himself, with a smile in which malevolence and vicious satisfaction were strangely mingled. "I will wager my life that it proves abortive—and costs you your own! Your good health—while you live—Mr. Boyd!"

Then he drank, and waited.

II.

There was a dull-gray mist hanging over the Hudson.

It was like a veil. At times it was lifted a little by a breath of air, revealing the varied features of the placid river and the adjacent landscape; but, for the most part, it hung listless over the broad stream, obscuring the farther shore, and partly veiling the grim, merciless face of the frowning penitentiary whose barred windows commanded a view of the stirring episodes then and there enacted.

It was approaching five o'clock in the afternoon, just a week subsequent to the interview between Boyd and Coleman at the Woodcock. That the Big Finger then had overheard all that had passed between them, and since had planned with audacious daring to turn to his own advantage the designs Boyd had imparted to the central office man, appears in the subdued intercourse of

two of a large gang of convict laborers, then engaged in the work mentioned by Jimmie Coleman.

One of the two was a burly, middle-aged ruffian, hard-visaged and powerful; the other was a slight, athletic fellow, obviously shrewd and intelligent, whose keen eyes and clean-cut features still evinced the same cold nerve and insolent assurance as when Felix Boyd finally ran him down long months before. The one was Rafferty, the burglar. The other was Paul Wykoff, the whilom chief lieutenant and adviser of Scanlon, the Big Finger.

Among a gang of about forty convicts, over whom half-a-score of armed guards were keeping constant watch, they were engaged in the construction of a broad wooden pier along the river bank. It was not entirely by chance, moreover, that the work then had brought these two so near that they could venture speaking one to the other, which was a serious violation of a rigorous rule.

Yet Rafferty presently snarled, with characteristic inelegance, and a furtive glance toward one of the guards:

"Curse that infernal screw! I believe he means to queer the whole business."

A faint smile curled Wykoff's thin lips.

"Not on your life," he whispered confidently. "Trust Scanlon to know what he is about. I have his word for it, Rafferty, the way is open."

"Yet the lamps of that damned elbow are always fixed on us, the devil take him! I'd like just one crack at his ugly block before the trick is turned. Curse me if I'd not put his light out."

"None of that, you fool, or you'll queer the game," frowned Wykoff.

"Which is Felix Boyd?"

"The stripey yonder, near the edge of the pier."

"Him with red hair?"

"It's a red wig, Rafferty, and he's made up with infernal skill. He is booked at our hotel as Jim Garvey, in for seven years."

"Seven hells!" muttered Rafferty, with a scornful growl. "I wish I felt as sure of this game as you do."

"So you would, Rafferty, if you knew Scanlon as well as I know him. Trust him to be dead right, first and last."

"Dead right this time is all I care for."

"He is wise to the whole of Boyd's crafty scheme, and it suits us to the letter. It insures our escape, just as I told you yesterday, and will throw Boyd himself into our clutches. God in heaven! I can imagine how he'll look and act when he learns how he's been duped into playing into our hands. He'll not suffer long from disappointment, however, once Scanlon again lands him under cover."

"He means to turn him down?"

"Without the least delay, and he'll be a fool if he doesn't," Wykoff bitterly muttered. "Why, man, there are nearly thirty stripeys here in Sing Sing, each of whom was once a member of Scanlon's gang, and every man of them was landed here at one time or another by Felix Boyd. Yet he never has been able to corner Scanlon, who constantly has a spy upon him, and hates him as the devil hates holy water."

All of this intercourse was little more than a succession of subdued growls, augmenting its grimness, and never a word reached the ears of the guards, nor any of the great gang of convict laborers thronging the pier and shore. It was partly drowned, moreover, by the constant noise of the hammers and tools in the hands of the toiling men.

Rafferty snarled impatiently, and glanced sharply across the river.

"Where's Scanlon now?" he muttered. "Do you know?"

"I saw the launch slip up-stream half-an-hour ago. The mist hides it just at present."

"Damn the mist!"

"Don't abuse your friends," murmured Wykoff coolly. "But for Felix Boyd, who has made it needless, this mist might have served us very well."

"Better, maybe, than Scanlon will, unless he——"

"Faugh! he'll not fail us."

"Then he must show up damned soon," growled Rafferty, who was like a hound in leash. "In another half hour we'll be doing the lock-step for the hotel."

"Not by a long chalk, Rafferty," Wykoff quietly protested. "There'll be time enough given us for the move

of to-day. Boyd himself has insured that. His game is not to prevent our escape, but by it, and his own crafty work, to land Scanlon and his entire gang. Just wait till we get him, and he learns how Scanlon has turned the tables on him."

"What if a guard stops me from——"

"No guard will interfere, I tell you, except the one who tackles me," Wykoff interrupted impatiently. "I have it direct from Scanlon, in the last secret cipher. Then Boyd will set the ball rolling, not as he thinks, but against himself, as blind as a bat to Scanlon's crafty—easy! Watch out! Yonder's the launch again!"

"By Heaven! you're right!"

"Steady! Not a move, Rafferty, till I give the word."

"Who's at the wheel?"

"Scanlon himself. Kearney is watching us through a glass. Ha! this is the time, for there's the signal, a white cloth in the house window. They are edging the craft this way."

"When do we——"

"Silence! Hang to your work."

The occasion of these last hurried utterances was still two hundred yards away—a low-lying steam-launch, not more than forty feet in length, yet evidently designed for speed, and having every appearance of a private pleasure craft. That she frequently had been seen during the past month, cruising aimlessly up and down the river, indicates the care taken to avert suspicion on the part of the prison guards, and the deliberate preparations made for the one bold stroke of that September afternoon.

As Wykoff's confidence suggests, moreover, this culminating move was made with a dash and abandon largely inspired by the operations of Felix Boyd, and the ignorance attributed to him of Scanlon's fund of information and counter-designs.

Out of the mist that hung like a veil over the river, the launch suddenly had emerged, bearing slowly downstream some fifty yards from the bank. Within half-a-minute every guard on the pier, and every convict, had discovered her. Yet only two observers, save those already mentioned, displayed more than a cursory interest *in her*, or in the three men discernible aboard her.

Clad in the garb of a convict, and with his features transfigured in a way evincing his exquisite art, Felix Boyd gradually worked nearer the outer edge of the partly constructed pier.

At the same time, one of the guards, to whom Rafferty had so viciously referred, sauntered to a position nearer Paul Wykoff. The latter suppressed a smile when he saw the move.

Meantime, the launch had drawn nearer, still heading down-stream, as if none aboard her had any interest in the convict work. When fifty yards above the pier, however, she veered slightly, showed her nose more plainly, and a sudden swirl of back-wash betrayed her increased speed.

Rafferty dropped the adz with which he had been working, shaken through and through with suppressed excitement, which Wykoff quickly observed, and hissed:

"Steady, you fool! Not yet!"

"By God! I'm——"

"You're going to do what I command! Wait, I say!"

"We'll be too late, curse you, if——"

"Wait—ten seconds!" Wykoff fiercely whispered, snatching the impatient ruffian by the wrist.

"Break away there, you two!" cried one of the guards suddenly.

His sharp command brought all eyes toward the two men addressed.

At the same moment, the launch, then barely thirty yards up-stream, clapped on a full head of steam, and veered sharply toward the pier.

Instantly, a yell rose with thrilling vehemence from Wykoff's lips.

"Now, then, Rafferty! Away with you!"

The burly ruffian needed no second bidding. With a roar that fairly drowned the immediate tumult of the startled gang of convicts, who at once saw the desperate escape about to be attempted, Rafferty leaped toward the edge of the pier, felling with a blow the guard who stood in his way, and in a moment more had plunged into the river.

As Wykoff darted in the same direction, however, the guard who had been constantly watching him dashed

across his path, and succeeded in grappling him from behind.

Verbal pictures do but scant justice to such scenes as that which followed, brief though it was.

To a man, the gang of convicts dropped their tools, rending the air with tumultuous yells and jeers, and swarming out upon the pier with a frenzied eagerness to seize this possible opportunity to escape. All were quick to see that only men of their own stamp would venture to abet so desperate a design as was plainly obvious.

The prison guards instantly fell to, and began to beat them back. Pistol-shots rang out above the swelling uproar, and within a moment a conflict was in progress that would beggar language.

Meantime, the launch darted nearer, head on, then a sharp sweep threw her broadside within a rod of the pier. Half-a-dozen men suddenly appeared at her port-rail, ready to lend a hand to their convict friends; and Rafferty, swimming like a madman to meet her, was nearly within their reach.

At the very beginning of all this, Wykoff swung fiercely around, and gripped the guard by the throat. In the struggle that followed, he was hurled to his knees, and, ordinarily, his chance of escape would have been hopelessly lost.

At that moment, however, Felix Boyd got in his work. With his features convulsed as if with genuine fury, he snatched a crowbar from the pier, and sprang toward the two struggling men.

"Drop that fellow!" he roared, above all the tumult. "Let him go, guard, or I'll brain you!"

The guard sprang quickly aside, and dodged the blow, apparently aimed at his head.

Wykoff came to his feet with a bound.

"Good for you, stripey! Now follow me!" he screamed, with one grateful look.

The guard snatched out a revolver, and fired, but the hand of Felix Boyd beat up the weapon, and the bullet went into the air. Before the attempt could be repeated, Boyd felled the man with a single blow, hurled aside a second guard who sprang in his way, and then plunged headlong over the edge of the pier, and into the river.

Rafferty already had been hauled aboard the launch. Wykoff, well in advance of Boyd, was gripping the hands outstretched to aid him. For a moment, however, it looked as if Boyd must be left astern of the swiftly moving boat.

The possibility of this brought a frenzied yell from Scanlon, in the wheel-house window.

"A line! Throw that man a line!" he shrieked furiously. "Don't let him fall astern! Throw him a line!"

Before the command was fairly uttered, a rope whirled through the air toward Felix Boyd, who caught it as it fell. Then he was suddenly yanked through the water with a violence that threatened to tear his arms from their sockets, as the launch swept around and away. Yet he held fast till he was hauled to the boat's rail, where ready hands drew him, panting and exhausted, to her after-deck.

Of all the pistol-shots that had served to enliven this scene, not a ball had found a mark. Of all the opposition displayed by the prison guards, hardly the least restraint had been imposed upon the three men who had reached the moving launch. Both Felix Boyd and the Big Finger had expected no less than this; the one had carefully planned it, and the other had overheard him outline the plan to Jimmie Coleman.

How so daring and desperate a design would have terminated, had Felix Boyd failed to fathom the convict code, will never be known. Be that as it may, however, Scanlon now felt absolutely sure that he had Boyd securely in his power—and well he might.

As the launch sped diagonally across the river, gradually leaving the pier and the frowning prison obscured by the gray mist, Scanlon gave the wheel to his companion, and, with his grim, hard features lighted by a triumphant smile, he hastened aft to join the several men.

"Your hand, Wykoff!" he cried deeply, as he approached them. "It's that of a free man again, and I'm glad to grip it."

"The pleasure is not yours alone, Scanlon," Wykoff heartily rejoined. "Freedom was never more welcome, and the trick was splendidly turned."

"That it was, and we're well away. Which of these men is Rafferty?"

"Here you, Rafferty! Come and shake hands with the Big Finger."

"Aye, I will, and gladly."

"Good for you, my man," cried Scanlon, as the burly ruffian approached. "Your looks, as well as your record, convince me that we shall be good friends. A square deal with your stolen bonds, Rafferty, will insure our future relations."

"We'll divide 'em this very night," Rafferty promptly declared. "Once in New York, I can quickly nail 'em."

"To-night it shall be, then."

"After this day's work, sir, trust me to act on the level with you."

"Good again, Rafferty," Scanlon cried approvingly. "Now, Wykoff, who is yonder fellow?"

Dripping from head to foot, Felix Boyd was leaning heavily upon the after-deck, as if well-nigh exhausted.

"He's an unexpected addition to our party," cried Wykoff. "You saw what he did on the pier. But for him, Scanlon, I reckon that cursed screw would have turned me down."

"I saw it all."

"I bade him follow me," added Wykoff, "and I'm glad you took him aboard. Freedom should be as welcome to him as to me, and it's a fair reward for the service he did me."

"He has it, then," cried Scanlon, approaching nearer to Boyd. "What's your name, my man?"

Boyd choked a little, spat a mouthful of river water over the rail, then grimly answered:

"Me name's Jim Garvey, boss. I'm a bit done up from me dousing. 'Tain't much in my line."

"That so?"

"Not overmuch."

"What is your particular line, Mr. Garvey?" smiled Scanlon, with a curious curl of his long upper lip.

A gleam of distrust appeared in Boyd's squinted gray eyes.

"It's a line I'm not likely to be leaky-mouthed about,

boss, before I know who I'm talking to," he growled doubtfully.

Scanlon laughed aloud, and gave his huge head a significant toss.

You're safe enough in trusting us, Mr. Garvey, never doubt that," he cried. "I'll leave it to all hands here, and the assurance of men in stripes like your own should be good enough for you."

"So 'twill be, boss, once they have given it."

"You are safe enough with us, Garvey, my word for it," Wykoff now declared. "I'm not one to forget a turn done me, and you cannot do better than cast your lot with ours."

"Mebbe not," admitted Boyd, with a nod. "I reckon your word's good enough for me."

"Besides," cried Scanlon, "you cannot evade arrest in that garb. We'll fit you out with traps we have ready below, and will land you safely under cover to-night, along with the rest of us. What do you say, Mr. Garvey?"

"What would any covey say to an offer o' that kind?" Boyd now rejoined with grim eagerness. "I say, yes, I'm with you!"

Scanlon quickly extended his brawny hand. Before Boyd could take it, however, a sharp cry broke from one of the several men near-by, whose attention had been briefly absorbed by the interview with this man who, craftily planning to outwit and arrest them, was taking his life in his hand to discover their headquarters.

"Look there, Scanlon!" the fellow cried. "We're pursued! There's a boat after us."

Scanlon swung round with a snarl, and gazed in the direction indicated.

"It's the prison boat," he cried quickly. "She cannot overhaul us. We can evade her in the fog. Yet we'll take no chances. Order Gibson to crowd the launch to her limit. We'll get out of sight in the mist, then make a landing on the west bank. Once ashore unseen, the rest will be easy."

"Your plan?"

"We'll break into parties of three and make for the railway, to meet at headquarters again to-night. Go

below, you three fellows, and get out of those prison togs. I'll look after the launch, and the craft containing those infernal elbows. Down with you, Garvey, and get into other clothes. There'll be no time to waste."

"In a jiffy, boss, the minute I get me wind," cried Boyd, who never once had ceased his labored breathing. Scanlon did not remain aft to enforce his instructions. As Wykoff disappeared below, he rushed away forward to take the wheel, while others ran to impart his hurried orders to the engineer.

His faith in the launch, moreover, was not misplaced. Within a minute she was tearing with the speed of a race-horse over the calm surface of the river, and the prison boat, obscured from the first by the heavy gray mist, was speedily lost to view. Not, however, before Felix Boyd had made his next move.

III.

"Are all here?"

The voice, sonorous and impressive, broke a profound silence; and the brief question, uttered with ominous deliberation, came from the Big Finger.

The time was midnight, more than six hours subsequent to the escape of the two convicts from Sing Sing prison.

The place was lower New York, that congested section located below the dead-line—the chief field of Felix Boyd's persistent labors and unrivaled exploits.

The scene was a basement storage room, that of a grim stone building long since displaced by a far more attractive and imposing edifice. Of the former, there now remain only dim memories of the evil uses to which it long was turned, undetected by the police; and of the knavery designed and the crimes perpetrated within its dismal walls.

For a brief period, it was the secret headquarters—their final resort, by the way—of the notorious gang of crooks and desperadoes rigorously dominated by that obscure genius for crime, the Big Finger.

This basement room was commodious, but low studded,

and only a few oil-lamps in brackets here and there on the walls lighted the place with their sallow rays.

The one broad door giving ingress to the room was heavily barred. The several windows were secured with exterior iron shutters, and thick curtains within covered every chink and crevice through which a ray of light could have reached the outer world. In this underworld, in fact, so obscure was its location, so devious and dark were the avenues by which it was approached, and so carefully guarded, criminals felt themselves secure from the police, and that the perpetration of crime involved no exterior peril.

In the sallow light of this room nearly a score of men were seated, some in wooden chairs near a low platform, others on benches ranged along the walls; and the faces of all, their low brows and sinister eyes, save those of one alone, wore the unmistakable look of the habitual criminal.

The one alone was Felix Boyd, seated with his back to the wall directly opposite the Big Finger, who occupied the chair at a common deal-table placed on the low platform mentioned.

Much had been said and done there that night; but only that which followed is essential to this record of the doings of Felix Boyd.

"All are here?"

As he repeated the question, Scanlon's gaze swept sharply over this gathering of his gang, and finally rested upon a swarthy man standing with Wykoff at one side of the low platform. His reply was made with a respectful subservience rigorously imposed by Scanlon on all such occasions.

"All are here, chief."

"Every member of our body."

"None is absent, chief."

"The two guards?"

They have been called in, and are present. The area gates have been closed and barred, and our retreat should be secure against intruders."

Scanlon's hard features relaxed a little, and a smile of malicious exultation played about his broad, cruel mouth.

"Not only should be secure, Kearney, but is!" he forc-

bly declared, with a sinister glance in Boyd's direction. "We have clipped the only claws to have been feared. There now remains only to complete the good work."

Boyd's countenance did not change by so much as a shadow. Yet he inwardly smiled at the indirect compliment, which implied that he had been more seriously feared than the entire body of local police.

As he surveyed the men gathered there, all of them outlaws, some of them ruffians, many of them that worst type of criminal in whom intelligence and desperation are combined—as he surveyed them, sitting silent and grim, as if this occasion was a most momentous one, with their sinister glances turned frequently upon him, he easily appreciated the tragic significance of Scanlon's last remark, and foresaw what was coming.

It was a situation to have tried the nerve of any man—save, possibly, Felix Boyd. Yet he knew that his life hung by a thread. He knew that, despite his disguise, he was known to all, and that every man among them regarded him with a mingling of fear and vengeful hatred that could be appeased only with his life. All knew why he was there, that their arrest and punishment, which for some was death itself, was his immediate ambition; and no spy in the hands of a foe could more vainly have pleaded for mercy.

Yet Felix Boyd felt a grim sense of satisfaction never before experienced. He enjoyed this realization of the hope expressed to Jimmie Coleman about a week before—that he again might confront Big Finger in the very midst of his knavish gang.

Before reverting to him, however, Scanlon turned briefly to Rafferty, the burglar, who occupied a chair near the side wall.

"You now have met, Rafferty, the body of men you will be invited to join," said he, with his sonorous voice dwelling effectively upon each word. "What say you? Is it your wish to become one of us, to subscribe to our covenant, to be bound by our oaths, and in return to derive equally with us the benefits of our organization?"

Rafferty looked a bit dazed, as if he failed to comprehend perfectly, or was seriously impressed with the

general silence and solemnity of this dismal conclave. Yet he promptly shook his head, and grimly answered:

"I say what I've said from the first. These coveys suit me, if I suit them; and I'm ready to be one of the gang."

"That will come later, Rafferty, and also the division of this valuable plunder," Scanlon slowly rejoined, placing his heavy hand upon a cloth-covered parcel on the table.

It was valuable, indeed. It contained the bonds and securities stolen the previous May from the vault of the Southern Trust and Insurance Company, the incentive which had led Rafferty's liberation from Sing Sing, and which had been produced by him nearly an hour before.

"Any time suits me," he growled indifferently. "I've done my part, and brought the stuff here, and I reckon you'll do your, as agreed."

"As agreed—yes!" said Scanlon curtly. "But first another matter is in order, and demands the attention of all. You, Garvey, what have you to say to me, and to these men?"

As he spoke, Scanlon carelessly took a revolver from the table drawer and laid it before him, an act which plainly indicated to Felix Boyd that the ball was about to begin.

"Me, boss?" said he coolly, with every eye in the room fixed upon him. "What would I say?"

"I wait with much curiosity to hear," declared Scanlon, with sinister significance.

"Well, I'm not one to keep a covey waiting long," replied Boyd dryly. "Your gang is all right enough, and as gallus a lot of crooks as one could wish to see."

"You think so, do you, Mr. Garvey?"

"Aye, I do, and I'm glad to be here."

"That sounds well, Mr. Garvey, and I really hope it is true," said Scanlon, with an indescribable smile. "You may be sure that we are glad to have you here."

"Good enough, boss!" exclaimed Boyd curtly. "This place to which you have brought me seems snug and safe, and out of danger from the police. I reckon I'm ready to remain, if you and your gang think well of it, and are——"

"Stop a bit!" Scanlon now interrupted, with a threatening ring in his hard voice. "This place is snug and safe enough. There is danger for one man only—yourself!"

"Why for me, boss?"

Scanlon laid his hand on his revolver, a move plainly indicating that, despite his recent remark, he still feared the claws of the man addressed. Leaning forward a little, with his searching gaze riveted on Boyd's face, he sternly answered:

"There is danger here for you, Mr. Garvey, because we happen to know that the name you really bear is that of—Felix Boyd."

Boyd started visibly. A look of surprise and alarm, entirely affected, leaped up in his gray eyes. He appeared to realize for the first time that his designs had miscarried, that he had been outwitted, and that a peril confronted him of which he had not dreamed. He glanced sharply about, and saw that the hand of nearly every man had reached for a weapon.

It was a strange and thrilling scene. For several moments the silence was profound, as oppressive as the stillness of a tomb. In vivid contrast with it, from some remote quarter outside, there could be faintly heard the whistling of a popular air, presumably the diversion of some lad or gamin in the city street. The very liveliness of it served to accentuate the deathly stillness that had followed Scanlon's threatening declaration.

Then Boyd startled all with a short, contemptuous laugh.

"So, so, Mr. Scanlon!" he exclaimed crisply. "It appears that I am better known than I imagined. Put up your weapons, you fellows, for I am entirely unarmed. Sorry I haven't with me that little device with which I once, on a very similar occasion, held you all at bay. At present, however, the odds are much in your favor, and I am quite harmless. A decidedly strained situation seems to exist. Let's be composed, gentlemen, and talk it over."

The audacious nerve with which he spoke amazed every hearer. Before concluding, moreover, he had deliberately removed most of his disguise, plainly revealing

his stern, clean-cut features, and had perched himself upon the back of his chair, with his feet on the seat of it, where he sat surveying the startled gang as if his suggestion to consider the situation involved nothing at all serious, say nothing of his own life.

Scanlon's heavy brows knit closer over his evil eyes, and he subdued with a commanding gesture the threatening murmur that rose from his men, not one of whom, however, ventured to speak. With his gaze fixed upon Boyd, and with his fingers toying restlessly with the butt of his revolver, he said sternly:

"You speak boldly, Mr. Boyd."

"Why not?" was the curt rejoinder. "That's my way, as you should have learned."

"True. Yet you treat lightly the situation in which you are placed. Do you realize the gravity of it?"

Boyd's lips curled a bit scornfully.

"Perfectly," said he.

"That you cannot now escape us?"

"That appears obvious."

"And that you have invited death by this last venture of yours?"

"The hazard of life never yet deterred me from doing my duty," said Boyd bluntly. "I fully realize my situation, Scanlon, and that it is eminently essential to the safety of you rascals that I should be effectually turned down. As a matter of fact, Scanlon, you had better make sure of it this time."

"We certainly shall."

"Very possibly. You look quite capable of it, both you and your rascally gang."

"We do not forget the past, and what we owe you."

"No wonder. The debt certainly is large."

"Right—it is large!" snarled Scanlon, with vengeful malignity. "Your life scarce will balance the account."

"Yet you had better take it, or your liabilities will steadily increase," Boyd curtly retorted. "I certainly shall not let up on you until I have you, one and all, lodged in prison cells."

"You have lost your last opportunity to accomplish that, Mr. Felix Boyd," Scanlon slowly answered, with terrible sternness. "If we fail to turn you down this

night, and end forever your relentless work against us, may we go from here in manacles, every man of us."

Boyd laughed coldly, still perched on the back of his chair.

"Stranger things than that have happened," he dryly rejoined. "Yet I admit that you now have the best of me. I am puzzled to account for it. Ordinarily, as you well have learned, I am not easily caught napping. This unexpected situation, and the fact that you discovered my identity, rather perplex me. Possibly you will briefly defer your sanguinary design, and consent to enlighten me. Even while recognizing your peculiar and unenviable genius, Mr. Big Finger, I never before have regarded you as my superior in acumen and cunning."

Boyd spoke with a sneer, with apparent indifference to the fate with which he had been threatened; and his obvious coldness, his derisive taunts, his attitude and air of utter unconcern, were not without effect upon his hearers, many of whom had previously encountered him, and knew of what artful tricks he was capable.

Some of the ruffians were moving restlessly in their chairs. Others were gripping their weapons more firmly, prepared for the slightest threatening move.

Scanlon ignored these indications of apprehension and impatience. With malicious satisfaction, he prolonged the interview, as a cat teases a mouse before slaying it; and with an evil smile at the left-handed compliment Boyd had bestowed upon him, he quickly rejoined, with caustic significance:

"Blind confidence in one's superior acumen and cunning, Mr. Felix Boyd, has brought better men than you to death's door, at which you now stand!"

"Yet the door still is closed," retorted Boyd pointedly.

"We shall open it."

"Possibly."

"There is time enough for that. You have played a bold game, Mr. Boyd; but you made one fatal error. It has cost you the game—and your life!"

"What error, pray?"

"The exposure of your hand."

"Impossible! In what way?"

"Men who discuss in a public restaurant their dis-

coveries and designs," cried Scanlon, with sinister scorn, "should cease to boast of their acumen and cunning."

"Oh, ho!" cried Boyd, with a start. "So that was the way of it, eh? You were playing the eavesdropper—and for once you appear to have outplayed me."

Scanlon's hard, beardless features took on a look of vengeful bitterness.

"The past has warned me to keep a watchful eye upon you," he sternly answered. "Do you think I would have attempted this game, now so successfully played, without having a constant spy upon you, and upon that hound of the central office who courses in company with you?"

"A wise precaution, surely," said Boyd crisply. "It appears to have worked very well."

"Since you are pleased to hear it, this story of your own lameness, I will go a step farther," sneered Scanlon.

"Do so, by all means. I quite enjoy it."

"Enjoy it while you may, then, for at longest the time will be brief," cried Scanlon more harshly. "I shadowed you to the Woodcock, and there overheard you disclose your designs to Coleman."

"Very lame of me, indeed, as you say."

"It was very clever, the counter-move you outlined," continued Scanlon, with a sneer. "You did not wish to prevent my little scheme, nor the delivery of two convicts from Sing Sing."

"Decidedly not," cried Boyd. "Far from it."

"Instead, in the hope of locating us and our headquarters, and subsequently causing our arrest, you planned to make it easy for me to continue my communication with Wykoff, and to frame up every move made this day. It would have been more clever, Mr. Felix Boyd, and possibly more effective, had I not overheard it."

"And met it with a counter-move, eh?" queried Boyd curtly.

"Precisely!" nodded Scanlon, with grim satisfaction. "It remained only for us to do the job, made easy by your own designs, and, having got you into our hands, to escape without being followed. You have seen how we accomplished it. Yours was a bold move. Mr. Felix Boyd; a desperate game to have played against men of

our cloth; and, having lost it, you must pay the price. You aimed to place yourself among us, then to insure our arrest——”

“Stop a bit!” cried Boyd abruptly. “You’ve made a mistake, Mr. Scanlon. You’ve got the cart before the horse, Mr. Big Finger. I aimed to insure your arrest, not after, but before I entered your villainous stronghold. Stop a bit, I say! There’s another side of the story!”

IV.

The quizzical scrutiny with which he had been badgering Scanlon still lingered in Boyd’s keen, gray eyes. Yet his voice, when he curtly interrupted, had a subtle ring unheard before, and the unexpected declaration he had made startled every hearer.

Scanlon glanced sharply about, checked with a gesture the apprehensive movements of several of his gang, then snarled suspiciously, with his frowning gaze reverting to Boyd’s dispassionate face:

“Speak plainly, curse you! Why do you say I’ve put the cart before the horse? What do you mean by another side of the story?”

Boyd had not moved from his seat on the back of his chair. His attitude was still that of absolute unconcern, and only the sharper gleam of his watchful eyes betrayed that he recognized any change in the existing situation. For a moment he did not answer, and again the profound silence was broken only by the sound heard once before—that distant whistling of a popular air as of a lad in the city streets.

Then Boyd laughed lightly, as he had done before.

“Don’t be alarmed, you fellows,” said he, with a glance over the frowning faces confronting him. “You seem to fear me, even while having all the best of me, as your rascally leader yonder stated. His cleverness is quite commendable, I am sure. It is true that I planned to make it easy for you to liberate Wykoff and yonder thieving ruffian. It is true that I apparently designed to aid their escape, and thus force myself among you. It is

true that, having landed me here without being tracked by the police, you should feel perfectly secure."

"And so we do, the devil take you!" cried Scanlon, with suppressed ferocity. "Why do you barter words in this fashion?"

"Because, as I remarked," said Boyd, with a curious smile, "there's another side of the story."

"What other side?" snarled Scanlon, with his malevolent eyes aglow with quickened suspicion.

Boyd leaned forward on his perch, and placed both arms across his knees.

"Let's suppose a case, Mr. Big Finger," said he, with a provoking display of candor. "You'll hear me with patience, I'm sure, as I heard you. It is only a supposable case, mind you, to illustrate the other side of the story. No foundation, in fact, as you'll plainly see."

Scanlon's hand had closed hard around his revolver. He distrusted this beginning, and a certain vague apprehension impelled him to learn what it presaged. With a darker frown, with his searching eyes fixed constantly on Boyd's unreadable face, he rejoined curtly:

"I'll hear what you have to say."

Boyd smiled again and nodded.

"I merely aim, since you have questioned my superior cunning, Mr. Scanlon, to show how you, even, might have overleaped your mount," said he, with insinuating suavity. "Suppose, to begin with, that you were not as clever as you thought. Suppose that merely by chance I discovered you on my track, that I at once suspected your purpose, that I deliberately led you to the Woodcock, and there selected one of two vacant booths adjoining, that you might overhear the disclosures and designs I confided to Coleman."

"Too far fetched!" sneered Scanlon. "Much too far!"

"Yet not impossible," argued Boyd, with insinuating pleasantry. "Suppose, to continue, knowing how readily you would take the bait, that I played the game into your hands up to the very moment you landed me aboard your launch."

"Admitting even that, we still should have the advantage," he cried savagely. "We could not have been followed. I made sure of that."

"Quite right," nodded Boyd. "The fog made pursuit next to impossible. Yet even that condition might have been overcome by a clever man."

"Like yourself?" sneered Scanlon.

"Like myself, if you will," nodded Boyd.

"In what way?"

"Suppose—for this still is supposition only," continued Boyd, still oddly smiling—"suppose that, while I leaned apparently exhausted against the rail of your launch, I had attached to it a few feet of fine, black thread, at the end of which was a small vial. Suppose I left it suspended over the side, while the launch fled across the river. Suppose the vial to have been filled with oil, which oozed drop after drop through a tube in the cork, and fell to the surface of the stream. It would have left upon the river, astern of the fleeing launch, what is known as a slick—a trail as easily followed as that of footprints in fresh fallen snow. Suppose that officers on the prison boat—stop a bit, you fellows!"

The situation suddenly had become strained. Several of the scowling gang had pulled their guns.

Boyd dropped to his feet behind his chair, and laid his hands on the back of it. The move appeared aimlessly made, yet he designed to use the chair for self-defense, if the need arose.

"Lend me your ears, you fellows!" he quickly added, with more austerity than yet had sounded in his voice. "I have a word of advice for you, one and all. If you are wise you will keep it in mind. Don't add murder to your list of crimes. The penalty is the gallows. Keep your neck out of the noose—that's my advice!"

"Stow your advice!" cried Scanlon, with a sudden savage outburst. "Do you think thus to divert us from our purpose?"

"Not at all," cried Boyd sharply. "I have been citing only a perfectly reasonable case. It does not appear to please you, yet follow it one step further. Suppose the launch to have been tracked across the river by the prison boat; suppose that officers aboard her shadowed us to the railway by means of bits of paper dropped by me in the woods through which we fled. Would not the rest have been easy? Even now half of the local police might sur-

round you, prepared to batter down your doors. Hark—hark just one moment! Do you hear a lad whistling in the street? Might not the lad be my own—and the whistle a signal to me that all is ready? Let us see—let us see!”

Only a man possessed of Boyd’s irresistibly magnetic qualities could have checked his excited hearers up to that crucial moment. Nearly all were upon their feet, some glaring affrightedly toward the windows and door, some staring wildly at Scanlon for instructions, while many, with weapons drawn, still hung fire over assailing this man, who, single-handed among them, too obviously had outlined the crafty work by which he now had them cornered.

Before a move could be made, however, Boyd thrust his fingers between his lips, and gave vent to a whistle so loud and shrill that it seemed to pierce the very walls.

It was answered almost instantly by a crash like that of thunder. With a huge timber the door had been dashed from its hinges. Over the threshold and into the room, with Jimmie Coleman foremost, half-a-hundred policemen and detectives quickly poured, in a way decidedly too business-like to have been wisely resisted.

Only one pistol-shot was heard. As the door fell, Scanlon leveled his revolver, and, with a snarl of fury, sent one shot in the direction of Felix Boyd. Before the trigger was pressed, however, Paul Wykoff had sprung across the low platform and beaten up the madman’s arm.

“You fool!” he hissed, seizing Scanlon’s wrist. “We’re done for—but take his advice! Keep clear of the noose! There are other days coming!”

The scene that followed requires no description. Such scenes and like raids are enacted almost daily. Within a quarter hour every man of Scanlon’s gang was in irons. Boyd himself took charge of Scanlon, bent upon making dead sure of him this time.

Upon reaching the street with him, however, he found that the two patrol-wagons waiting there were already crowded. Coleman happened to observe the situation, and at once approached.

“Take him away in yonder hack, Felix,” he cried.

"It's the one I came down here in. I'll see you later at headquarters."

Boyd nodded, and turned to the police sergeant who had Scanlon by the arm.

"Detach one of those bracelets, sergeant, and hitch him to me," he said. "I will take no chances with him in a hack, and you'd better go along with us."

The officer readily complied, and with Scanlon's wrist manacled to his own, and the sergeant occupying the opposite seat, Boyd presently drove away with his prisoner.

Before they had covered two blocks, however, despite all of Boyd's precautions, Satan once more served his own, in a strange and unexpected way. An alarm of fire was sounding over the city, and in rounding a corner the rapidly driven carriage collided with a chemical engine tearing through the cross street.

The sudden crash, the rending of woodwork, the quick overthrow of vehicles and horses—all was over in the fraction of a second.

When Felix Boyd regained consciousness, he found himself on a cot in the Bellevue Hospital, with two fractured ribs and a damaged head, and with Jimmie Coleman seated beside him.

The central office man smiled fondly upon seeing Boyd open his eyes.

"Better not talk much yet, Felix," said he, rather huskily.

"Good heavens!" muttered Boyd. "What's happened?"

"A serious accident, dear fellow," said Coleman gently. "The police sergeant was killed outright. You'll come out of it all right, however, and we landed all but one of Scanlon's gang, and all of the stolen bonds."

"All but one!" echoed Boyd, raising himself a little. "You don't mean, Jimmie, that the—the Big Finger—escaped!"

In mutely eloquent response, Coleman held up one-half of a pair of broken handcuffs, and Felix Boyd fell back with a heartsick groan.

"God above, Jimmie! is it possible? Then we have scotched the snake, not killed it!"

The Case of the Tan Glove.

I.

"No, no, Jimmie, you can't keep a good man down," smiled Mr. Felix Boyd. "It's utterly impossible. You may get him down, mind you, and by fixing a cast-iron grip upon him you may, perhaps, keep him down for a time. But the instant you loose your hold, take my word for it, Jimmie, he'll bob up serenely from under your arm, or betwixt your legs, or from some utterly unexpected quarter, and have at you again. No, no, Jimmie, you can't keep a good man down."

The central office man smiled complacently over his Blue Points, in the consumption of which he was too diligently absorbed to reply, and Felix Boyd presently added, in ruminating mood:

"So it is with the Big Finger, Jimmie. We've had him down half-a-score of times in the past year, or as good as down; and in each and every case, just before its culmination, just before our final blow was dealt, we'd have wagered our very lives against his escape."

"So we would, Felix," admitted Coleman, with a dubious nod.

"Yet in each and every case, Jimmie, he has slipped like an eel through our fingers," continued Boyd. "Owing to no fault of ours, mind you, no lack of precaution or shrewdness on our part; but merely because Satan, so it seems to me, often derives infinite satisfaction from serving his own at such critical moments."

"Very likely," laughed Coleman. "That's surely a philosophical way of looking at it."

"I think so, Jimmie."

"He certainly is a good man, this Big Finger, or he never could have balked and baffled you as he has done. Yes, he's a good man—in his infernal bad line!"

"And, as I said in the beginning, Jimmie, you can't keep a good man down," added Boyd, a bit grimly. "Take my word for it, the cover will slip again before we fairly know it, and, like an ugly jack-in-the-box, the Big Finger will again bob up, to give us renewed anxiety and additional trouble."

"Think so, Felix?"

"I do, indeed, Jimmie," nodded Boyd. "Idleness is as alien to that evil genius as beneficence is to a hog. We certainly shall hear from him again."

"Yet a month has passed since that Sing Sing affair, resulting from the convict code."

"A month is but little in the life of a man."

"That's true enough, Felix. Yet we succeeded in landing every man of his gang—save him alone."

"Humph! He soon will organize another."

"Do you believe it?"

"It's as sure as death and taxes, Jimmie. A month, did you say? Yes, so it is. Two weeks in Bellevue, nursing a brace of broken ribs; and two weeks recuperating in the Adirondacks. I marvel that the Big Finger did not seize the opportunity presented by my absence, to develop and execute one of his infernally crafty and—— Hello! break off for a moment, Jimmie! I've an idea that yonder men are talking of me."

And Felix Boyd bent a furtive glance in the direction of two young men, who were seated at lunch in the main room of the café.

The scene was a popular down-town restaurant, within a few blocks of the busy section of New York included below the dead-line, the territory specially assigned to Detective Coleman of the central office, and the field of most of Felix Boyd's remarkable exploits.

It was, as Coleman had said, just a month since that great police raid designed and directed by Boyd, which had resulted in the wholesale capture of the gang of accomplished crooks dominated by the notorious Big Finger, whose criminal operations below the dead-line long had been a menace to every great financial institution there located.

As previously related, the escape of this obscure master criminal had been entirely accidental, a mishap which had

cost Felix Boyd not only his chief prisoner, but also two broken ribs and other less serious injuries.

The couple referred to by Boyd, as above noted, appeared to be discussing some object which one of them had produced from a small wad of white cotton, taken from his fob pocket, and which had led his companion to glance occasionally in Boyd's direction. Returning it after a brief examination, he remarked, with a smile:

"It looks all right, Gerry. In my opinion, the diamond is a valuable one."

Gerry replaced the glittering gem in the wad of cotton, then jammed it back into his pocket.

Glad to hear you say so, Delmore," he rejoined.

"As a matter of fact, however, my opinion is valueless, for I am not a judge of precious stones," added Delmore, who was a reputable Wall Street broker of the younger set. "But there's a very easy way of getting at the truth."

"How so?"

"Submit the stone to Mr. Felix Boyd. He very quickly will pass upon it for you, and his judgment is infallible."

"Mr. Felix Boyd?"

"Don't you know him?"

"I can't say that I do."

Delmore's brows arched perceptibly.

"Humph! Is that so?" he murmured surprisedly. "I thought everybody knew Felix Boyd."

"I have been abroad for three years," remarked Gerry, with apologetic humility. "What about this man—Mr. Felix Boyd?"

Delmore dipped his fingers into the cut-glass bowl the waiter had placed before him, then deliberately dried them with his napkin.

"Well, Gerry," he presently rejoined, "one might say a good deal about Felix Boyd, and then leave much unsaid. There are few, indeed, who could tell it all; for Boyd, and his secret relations with some of the financial kings of Wall Street, are mysteries yet to be unveiled. If you have finished your lunch, Gerry, I will introduce you to him. He sits at the single table in the alcove yonder, with Detective Coleman, of the central office."

"I'll go with you at once," said Gerry.

"They are coming this way, Felix," said Coleman, as the two men approached.

"So I see, Jimmie."

"Know them?"

"One only—young Delmore. His father is on my list of clients."

Boyd did not so much as glance up when the two men drew near, yet Delmore at once said familiarly:

"How are you, Mr. Boyd? I hope we don't intrude. I wish to introduce a friend of mine, Mr. Talbot Gerry. He has just returned from a three-year jaunt abroad, and I wish you to know him."

Boyd's drooping lids were raised with indolent interest, yet his gaze lingered oddly for a moment upon Gerry's face. He laid aside his napkin, with lips relaxing to a smile, and extended his hand.

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Gerry," said he. "I saw you in Algiers two years ago last Thursday."

Gerry started slightly, then laughed.

"Well, really, Mr. Boyd!" he exclaimed. "That's curious. I confess I was in Algiers about that time."

"At precisely that time, Mr. Gerry," smiled Boyd. "I was there seeking an antique Moorish simitar, which I wished to add to my collection. I observed you only by chance."

"Well, well, you must have an excellent memory, Mr. Boyd, to have recalled the date so readily."

"Tolerably good, yes. What's the news, Delmore?"

And Felix Boyd bowed and smiled to the one, turned conventionally to the other, and then relapsed into his former indifference much as if the episode had ended.

"Nothing new, Boyd," replied Delmore. "By the way, Gerry, let's see that stone. We'll ask Mr. Boyd's opinion of it."

"Delighted, I am sure," cried Gerry, hastening to produce the wad of cotton.

"Have a look at this Mr. Boyd, will you? You are said to be a judge of such things, and we'd like to know what you make of it. I call it a diamond, and a very good one."

Felix Boyd accepted the proffered gem, and studied it

for several moments in the palm of his hand. Presently he looked up and said:

"Where did you get this stone, Mr. Gerry?"

Gerry colored deeply, then covered his momentary embarrassment with a laugh.

"Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Boyd, I loaned an acquaintance forty dollars last night, and accepted that stone as collateral."

"He was a bit hard up, eh?" smiled Boyd, with a sharper glint in his lifted eyes.

"So it appeared."

"A friend of yours?"

"Well—no—not exactly," faltered Gerry. "Merely an acquaintance."

"Been long acquainted with him?"

Gerry laughed again, rather half-heartedly.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Boyd, I never saw him until last evening," said he. "I ran across him while doing the town in a rather rakish fashion, and we traveled a bit in company. Incidentally he complained of being temporarily strapped, and I made him the loan mentioned."

"Naturally you learned his name?"

"The name he gave me, in return for my card, was Peterson. Yet I cannot say it was reliable, nor where he now may be found."

"That is very much to be regretted," said Boyd, with curious intonation.

"Why so, sir? Is there any doubt about the stone?"

Boyd rolled the glistening bauble across the damask table toward his questioner.

"The stone is a production of art, Mr. Gerry, not of nature," said he, with quiet significance. "It is one of the best artificial diamonds I ever saw."

"Artificial!"

"Precisely. Yet it is so good that it might deceive even a practised eye. As I remarked, Mr. Gerry, it is much to be regretted that you cannot locate your friend of last evening. Should you again encounter him, I would suggest that you have him detained by the police."

"I'll do that, at least!" exclaimed Gerry, quite red and heated. "Come, Delmore, I feel the need of a stimulant. Will you join us, Mr. Boyd?"

"I think not now, thank you," said Boyd, smiling. "Some other time, if agreeable to you."

"Charmed at any time, I assure you."

Boyd gazed after the two men as they left the room. Only his eyes betrayed his quickened interest. They had taken on a gleam like that reflected from a polished blade in the moonlight. Presently he drew out a leather notebook, and with a pencil jotted down the name of Mr. Talbot Gerry.

"What do you make of that, Felix?" inquired Coleman curiously.

Boyd shook his head significantly.

"It is another of those paste diamonds, Jimmie, of which I told you," he replied. "This is the second I have seen, yet I plainly could have learned no more than before concerning the maker. He must be found—located—annihilated! His art is dangerous. His skill is a menace. Such imitations threaten the financial safety of every jewelry-dealer in the country, if not in the world. I again must warn my clients in that line of the existence of these remarkable counterfeits. Are you through, Jimmie? Come, then. I'll attend to it this very day."

Coleman had merely nodded in response to the question, and the two men left the restaurant in company. As they emerged to the sunlit street, thronged at that hour with hurrying people, Boyd briefly paused and asked:

"Where now, Jimmie?"

"I'm going up to headquarters for a spell," replied Coleman. "I have a report to turn in, and two letters to write."

"Shall I see you later?"

"I'll drop into your office about five."

"So long, then."

The central office man bowed and departed.

Boyd lingered for several moments in the restaurant doorway, with his brows knit in thought. He had in mind the artificial gem he had just seen, a most remarkable imitation of a genuine diamond, and no man was quicker to discern the alarming possibilities such counterfeits afford.

Boyd had on his list of clients several wealthy diamond importers and brokers of Maiden Lane, as well as two large retail jewelry houses; and of them, too, he was thinking, and of the warning with which he might serve them.

Thus coming events at times cast their shadows before. For as Boyd presently turned to depart, he suddenly observed his office boy, Terence Gowan, bolting across the street toward him.

"Gosh! I'm just in the nick of time," gasped Terry, flushed and well-nigh breathless. "You're wanted at once, Mr. Boyd."

Boyd's clean-cut, attractive face changed like a flash, instantly taking on that flinty, determined look which invariably characterized him when engaged by any professional emergency.

"By whom?" he curtly demanded, with eyes dilating.

"Dabney & Co., sir, Maiden Lane," cried Terry, with amazing volubility. "They sent a messenger to your office, and I rushed here to——"

"Stop a bit! Do you know what has happened at Dabney's?"

"Not sure, sir. A big swipe of diamonds, I think the messenger said. He waited only a moment——"

"Which is longer than I should wait!" interrupted Boyd, with startling vehemence, when the diamonds were mentioned. "Here, you, cabbie, this way! I may want you, Terry, so in with you. Don't spare your horse-flesh, cabbie. A dollar a minute—that's your fee! To Dabney & Co., jewelers, Maiden Lane, at the top of your speed!"

Then a bang of the closed door—and a vehicle tearing through the crowded street.

Passing people stared and wondered.

II.

A dollar a minute was not an extravagant fee for Felix Boyd to have offered his cabman, for scarce three minutes had passed when the carriage drew down at the curbing fronting the great retail jewelry store of Messrs. Dabney

& Co., in those days one of the note worthy attractions of Maiden Lane.

"Wait here, cabbie," commanded Boyd, as he sprang out upon the sidewalk. "You, Terry, follow me in, as I may want you. Display no interest in my doings, however."

"Not I, sir!" rejoined the lad. "Trust me for that."

Boyd entered like an ordinary customer, yet strode quite briskly down one of the broad aisles between the splendid counters, with only cursory glances at the magnificent display of merchandise on every side.

Yet before Boyd had passed half through the long aisle, he was hurriedly approached by an elderly, distinguished-looking man, obviously much agitated. who whispered rapidly as he grasped Boyd's arm:

"This way, quick! Thank Heaven you're here! I despatched a messenger for you at once. We have been swindled——"

"Hush! Be prudent!" growled Boyd, with a reprehensive glance at the man. "Whatever the occasion of your agitation, Mr. Dabney, it cannot warrant the slightest betrayal of our secret business relations. Compose yourself at once."

In order to dispel the misgivings of any observer, for the popular store was well filled with customers at that hour, Boyd fell to laughing softly before the last was said; and the man addressed, who was the head and front of the famous firm, at once took the cue so quietly given him.

"Ah, true!" he softly exclaimed, with an attempt to force a smile to his pale face. "I will be more discreet, Mr. Boyd."

"What is the trouble? Quietly."

"I have just been robbed of a dozen valuable diamond rings—swindled in a most absurd manner."

"How and by whom?"

"By a woman who pretended she wished to make a purchase. She was shown a tray of very valuable rings, many of which she briefly examined. While doing so she managed to steal twelve of the rings, and substitute in their places twelve almost perfect duplicates as regards settings. The stones the substitutes contain, however,

while of nearly the same size as those stolen, are imitations only, of a most remarkable character."

"Ha! So I'm too late!" Boyd ejaculated. "I came here to warn you of these imitations. I have done so once before, Mr. Dabney, as you may remember."

"True—that is true. I should have been more guarded. Yet my clerks are experienced, and are thoroughly trustworthy. I could not have believed such a theft possible."

"There are some very clever knaves at work about here nowadays, Mr. Dabney," said Boyd pointedly. "These remarkable imitations——"

"Oh, they completely deceived Mr. Gibson, my clerk, and the woman's dexterity in substituting the bogus rings must have been extraordinary," groaned Dabney, under his breath. "I went to question Gibson soon after the woman departed, wondering if she had made a purchase, and I then discovered the fraud."

"How long ago?"

"Barely half-an-hour."

"What is the value of the stolen goods?"

"More than three thousand dollars."

"I will talk with Gibson and see what may be done," said Boyd. "Wait one moment, Mr. Dabney."

"Well?"

"Allow me to do all of the talking with Gibson, and present me to him, and remark upon the facts, entirely as if your disclosures of the loss were merely incidental. I do not wish Gibson to infer that I am in your service. Leave me to get at the facts, in so far as he can impart them. I can do so better than you."

Dabney slightly inclined his gray head, and yielded to Boyd's restraining hand as the two approached a counter somewhat removed. A middle-aged man of frank countenance stood behind it, who anxiously regarded his employer as the two men drew near. Half-an-eye convinced Felix Boyd, who was a keen physiognomist, that the clerk was honest.

"Let me see that tray of rings again, Gibson," said Mr. Dabney, halting with Boyd at the counter. "This gentleman is an expert, and I wish to submit them to him."

I have told him of the swindle by which I fear we have been victimized."

Gibson hastened to bring the desired tray from a vault in the wall, and with agitated hands placed it upon the broad glass show-case.

"Alas! I can never forgive myself," he groaned, with a hopeless look at Boyd's firm, inscrutable face.

From their dark background of plush, each ring occupying a tiny slot in the tray, which was invariably kept filled to prevent any undetected theft by an examiner of them, half-a-hundred costly solitaires gleamed and blazed with dazzling radiance, as if with a light and life all their own.

Boyd bowed above the tray, and for several moments silently studied its contents. Then, with the tip of his pencil, one after the other, he raised twelve of the rings from the slots, and dropped them upon a square piece of velvet on the show-case.

"Victimized—yes, Mr. Dabney, there is no doubt of it," said he, glancing up. "Just a dozen, sir, you said. I do not much wonder that your clerk did not detect the substituted imitations; they are extraordinarily good. By the way, Mr. Gibson, are there any previous circumstances bearing upon the prospective sale which led you to show this tray of rings to the woman who, I understand, has stolen some of them?"

"You may state any facts to this gentleman, Gibson," remarked Mr. Dabney.

The clerk hastened to reply.

"I never saw the woman before to-day," said he. "About a week ago, however, a young man called and examined these rings, saying that he intended to buy one. He did not make a selection that day, but said he would call again in the course of a week and do so."

"Well?"

"He called this morning, sir, about twelve o'clock, and I again showed him the rings. Finally, he selected one, asking me to remember it, and said that he wished his wife to call and see it before he made the purchase. He said that she would call about two o'clock to-day, and I gave him one of my cards."

"Go on, Mr. Gibson."

"Just before two o'clock a young lady approached the counter here and presented the same card, requesting me to show her the rings at which her husband had been looking. Naturally, sir, I had no suspicion, and readily complied. She examined the tray of rings, and we discussed them together, possibly occupying a quarter hour; yet not for a moment did I lose sight of the tray, or of her. She finally decided that her husband had made a desirable selection, and said she would at once send him a note, advising him to call and get the ring on his way home to-day, lest it should be sold to another. I provided her with paper and pencil, and she wrote the note, and immediately departed. Alas, sir, we since have discovered——"

"One moment, Mr. Gibson," Boyd interposed, now that he had got most of the man's story. "The method adopted by the swindlers is very obvious. The young man first called to study the tray of rings, that counterfeits might be made with which to deceive you. His visit this morning was calculated only to pave the way for his wife, thus tending in a measure to relax your vigilance. She evidently is a woman of superior nerve and exceeding dexterity. Under your very eyes she must have palmed the genuine rings, and disposed of them on her person, substituting only the counterfeits."

"It appears so," groaned Gibson, wringing his hands. "I could not have believed it possible, however."

"Kindly answer a few questions for me, Mr. Gibson. First describe the young man."

"He appeared to be about twenty-five, of medium height and build. He was rather boyish-looking, as I recall him, wearing neither beard nor mustache. I should say that his complexion was light, his eyes blue, and his voice somewhat effeminate."

"How about the woman, Mr. Gibson?"

"She, too, was young, sir, and very pretty. She was fashionably dressed, and I naturally supposed her to be a young lady of wealth. She was rather above medium size, I should say, with fascinating eyes and a most alluring smile. I think of no special features by which she could be identified, nor any——"

"One moment, please. How long since she departed?"

"Possibly half-an-hour."

"Were there any names mentioned?"

"None, sir."

"Perhaps you supposed the two parties to be a recently married couple."

"That was precisely my impression, sir."

"Quite in order, I'm sure," nodded Boyd. "Really Mr. Dabney, the case seems to present no very encouraging features."

"None at all that I can see," was the dubious rejoinder. "The scoundrels certainly have gotten well away with the goods."

"If you had but a single clue to offer the——"

"Oh, stay! that glove!" cried Mr. Dabney abruptly. "Possibly that will suggest something to Mr. Boyd."

"Ah, what is this?" cried Boyd, with a second warning glance at the impulsive speaker.

Gibson had produced from behind the counter a fashionable tan glove, lady's size, slightly worn and soiled. As he laid it upon the show-case in front of Boyd, he quickly rejoined:

"It was dropped by the woman, sir, while she was writing the note mentioned. I did not discover it until she had gone, then saw it lying near the lacquer table yonder."

"You are sure that it was hers?" inquired Boyd.

"Absolutely! She had both gloves in her hand while examining the tray of rings."

"Ah, very likely!" growled Boyd pointedly. "Possibly some of the purloined rings found their way into the other glove. A pity, too, it had not been this one. It bears no mark by which to track her. Medium size, however, and of French make. You say she sat at yonder table while writing the note?"

And Boyd glanced again at a small, highly polished table which stood in the aisle, with one of the counter chairs still beside it.

"Yes, sir," replied Gibson. "She occupied that chair. I provided her with a single sheet of paper which I happened to have here, and loaned her my pencil. She said she did not require any envelope, as she would send the note to her husband's office by her footman."

Boyd did not appear to have heard the last. Several of the store clerks had gathered in a group near-by, and those standing nearest to him saw, or thought they saw, one swift, intensified gleam, as sharp as an electric flash, leap up from the depths of his frowning, gray eyes.

It was gone in an instant, however, and Boyd then dropped into the chair the thief had occupied, and proceeded to make a closer inspection of her tan glove—the one and only tangible clue to the mysterious pair of swindlers.

"Footman, eh?" he presently growled, plainly indicating that he had heard, despite appearances. "She came in a carriage, then?"

"So I inferred," replied Gibson.

"You did not see the vehicle?"

"I did not, sir. Wishing to replace the tray of rings in the vault as soon as possible, I did not accompany her to the door."

There was a brief period of silence, the more strained because of the obvious mental absorption of the man in the chair. Felix Boyd sat tipping the small, polished table to and fro, with his brows knit, his lips drawn and his gaze vacantly fixed upon the dainty bit of furniture. Through one of the broad plate-glass windows near-by the glare of light fell full upon its polished surface, and accentuated with its reflection Boyd's strangely set and forceful face.

Presently he started abruptly and glanced at his watch, finding it to be nearly half-past two.

"Suppose you bring those twelve bogus rings into your private office, Mr. Dabney," said he carelessly, as he arose. "An examination under a lens may reveal something."

"Possibly," admitted Dabney; yet for his life he could not have told what advantage was thus to be derived. "You may put them in a small box for me, Mr. Gibson."

"I will take along this tan glove, also," remarked Boyd, sauntering away in advance.

As he approached the end of one of the counters, however, at which Terry Gowan was staring idly into a show-

case, Boyd's indifference suddenly took wings. His hand closed upon the lad's arm with a grip that betrayed his suppressed energy, and he bowed to whisper rapidly:

"Find the store telephone, Terry! Get Coleman at the central office! Have him meet me at the Hotel Tripoli at three o'clock! Three sharp, mind you! Hotel Tripoli!"

"I'm wise, sir!" the lad quickly nodded, and immediately glided away.

As Boyd stepped aside for Dabney to precede him into the latter's private office, which was at the rear of the store, he took from the jeweler's hand the small paste-board box containing the dozen bogus rings.

"I'll keep these for a spell, Mr. Dabney," said he, with curious indifference. "By the way, while I think of it, what is the price of the lacquer table out yonder, the one at which I was seated?"

"Forty dollars," cried Dabney, perplexed and irritated. "That's a strange question to ask at such a time as this. Is your interest in that infernal little table more pronounced than in the service you are employed to render me? If it is, Mr. Felix Boyd——"

"Oh! stow all that!" Boyd curtly interrupted. "I'll take the table at the price quoted. Set it aside for me without fail. I shall call here again before six, Mr. Dabney, and then will report on this case."

"But——"

"There are no buts, sir, when I declare myself," growled Boyd, thrusting the glove and box of rings into his pocket. "It now is half-past two. At three I have an important engagement. Expect me again within the interval mentioned. Meantime—not a word!"

"Why—certainly—not a word!" gasped Dabney, with an amazed stare.

For Mr. Felix Boyd already had departed.

III.

Upon emerging from the jewelry store, Boyd hastened to his waiting carriage.

"To the Hotel Tripoli, cabbie," he sharply commanded. "Lose not a moment, mind you. The same fee goes."

"It's up to me, sir," nodded the hackman, quick to see that some serious emergency existed, and that each second was of value.

He drove through the noisy streets at a rate of speed that threatened not only his own vehicle, but many another as well, and caused more than one blue-coated patrolman to start involuntarily, and also tardily, as if to stop him.

Reclining upon the cushions within, Mr. Felix Boyd was complacently smoking a cigar.

He threw it away when the carriage began to slow down, and again consulted his watch. It wanted eight minutes of three, as he sprang out upon the sidewalk in front of the hotel mentioned.

"Wait, cabbie," said he, glancing sharply up and down the street.

"Right, sir."

In no direction was there any sign of Jimmie Coleman, yet Boyd did not defer operations pending his arrival. With the cabbie gazing curiously after him, he quickly mounted the steps of the hotel, which was a tolerable brick edifice of six stories, and entered the open vestibule. There were numerous guests lounging about the inner office, and his entrance was not specially noticed.

Approaching the register, Boyd glanced rapidly at the names inscribed on the latest pages. Presently he lighted upon one in a curious, angular hand, which again brought that cold and relentless gleam to his searching eyes. The line across the page read:

"Mr. and Mrs. Philip Kelsey, City. 231."

The number was that of the suite occupied by the Kelseys.

Boyd did not summon a bell-boy. He entered the elevator, located the suite mentioned, and presently approached the door.

That the rooms were occupied at that moment was immediately obvious—the key had been left in the door, on the hall side.

Once more Boyd glanced at his watch. It wanted three minutes of three. Then he knocked gently upon the closed door of Suite 231.

A voice from within called promptly:

"Come!"

Boyd drew himself up, smiled oddly for an instant, then gravely entered the room, closing the door behind him.

"I beg pardon, sir," said he, with a graceful bow. "I hope I do not intrude."

The remarks were addressed to a youthful, curly-haired chap, clad in a neat plaid suit, who had been surveying himself before a mantel mirror. He had turned when Boyd entered, however, and, upon seeing him, he gave vent to an involuntary ejaculation of surprise, more than half suppressed.

"I thought it was my wife who rapped," he said quickly. "Haven't you made a mistake, sir?"

"I think not, providing the hotel register is reliable," Boyd unctuously rejoined, bowing and smiling. "I am looking for Mrs. Philip Kelsey. I presume that you, sir, are Mr. Kelsey."

"Yes, that is my name," bowed the young man. "My wife is absent just now, however."

Kelsey appeared pale, strangely pale, and his fair features were tensely drawn; yet he steadily met Boyd's gaze with his dilated blue eyes, and his rather effeminate voice never faltered.

"When will your wife return, Mr. Kelsey?" inquired Boyd, quite affably.

"I cannot say, sir."

"No?"

"I have just come in myself. What is your business with her, please?"

"I would prefer to inform her, providing she returns in time for——"

"Surely, sir, it cannot consist of anything of which I should be kept in ignorance," interrupted Kelsey, with a dark frown sweeping to his fair, attractive face.

Boyd laughed softly, and shook his head.

"Why, no, of course not," said he. "It consists of nothing very important. I am a messenger from Messrs Dabney & Co., the jewelers, of Maiden Lane. Your wife called there this afternoon to look at the ring you contemplated buying. Unfortunately, Mrs. Kelsey dropped

one of her gloves, which was found after she departed, and I have been sent here to return it to her."

And Mr. Felix Boyd drew the tan glove from his pocket, and advanced to place it upon the table.

Kelsey had grown as white as the linen at his throat, yet his nerve did not appear to forsake him. He drew himself up, forcing a sickly smile to his drawn lips, and directed one furtive glance toward the closed door, between which and him Mr. Felix Boyd remained standing.

"This is very kind of you, yet you have been to needless trouble," said he, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "The glove is worth but little. You may leave it, sir, and I will hand it to my wife."

"Ah, yes, thank you," drawled Felix Boyd.

Yet he did not depart.

Kelsey regarded him for a moment, as a cat watches a mouse.

"Is there anything more?" he abruptly demanded. "Why do you remain?"

"To see that your wife gets her glove," smiled Boyd.

"I tell you that I will hand it to her when she returns," cried Kelsey impatiently.

"I would prefer to wait until she returns, if it's all the same to you."

"Absurd! She may be absent for some time."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Kelsey, I will wait," persisted Boyd. "My patience will not be severely tried, and I wish to see her."

"For what?"

"You shall know when she arrives."

Kelsey no longer could command himself, a fact of which he was painfully obvious. He stood trembling visibly, with hands clenched as if to govern his perturbation while his glittering eyes had taken on the hunted look of an animal at bay.

Suddenly he stepped forward, as if hit with an idea.

"If you are thus determined," he cried resentfully, "I'll see if I can find her. She may be in the room of a friend across the hall. I'll see if she is there, and will bring——"

But Felix Boyd fell back a step, and checked him with a gesture.

"Stop a bit," he curtly commanded. "You need not bring her, Mr. Kelsey."

"But——"

"I prefer that you should wait with me until she arrives."

"For what reason?" the young man now cried angrily. "This is absurd! For what reason, I say?"

"Once more—you shall know when she arrives."

"But I can bring her——"

"I do not wish it."

"This is absurd—I'll not submit to it!" cried Kelsey, with his voice grown shrill, and his lithe, slender figure shaken with passion. "Let me pass! Let me pass, I say! I'll see if I can find her."

Boyd threw out his arm, and now cried sternly:

"You will remain here, Mr. Kelsey."

The young man fell back a step, with hands fiercely clenched, and lips mutely twitching. For a moment, he seemed at a loss what to do. Then his restless glance, which had been darting from window to door, and from door to window, suddenly saw that the key of the door was missing—he knew it was where he had left it—in the hall outside.

He seized upon the one bare chance the situation presented, yet was crafty even in his swelling desperation. He turned on his heel, and strode to one side, nearer the window, crying shrilly:

"You are mad—stark mad, sir! Unless you let me go, I will ring for help! You shall be ejected from my rooms! You shall be——"

At that point he turned, however, with face convulsed with desperate resolution. With a bound as light as that of a panther, he leaped toward the door, his design being to gain the hall, and quickly lock Boyd in the room.

Boyd had suspected his intentions, however, and met him half-way. With a leap to one side, he caught the frenzied man in his arms, crushing him for an instant to his breast.

Then came the culmination—the very last discovery Boyd, with all his discernment, anticipated.

For a mingled scream and moan of anguish and dis-

may broke from Kelsey's lips, and Boyd suddenly realized that the yielding form he held was—not that of a man!

"Good God!" he cried, with an irrepressible gasp. "A woman!"

Involuntarily he had released her, and fell back toward the door. He now saw it all, this game from beginning to end, and that the clever and crafty party confronting him was but little more than a girl, surely not above twenty-five. That her cunning did not end with this unexpected disclosure of her sex, however, he very speedily learned.

A flood of crimson had risen over the face of the shrinking girl, whose passionate frenzy appeared instantly dispelled. Mute and abashed, she stared for a moment at Boyd's startled countenance, then suddenly buried her face in her hands, and burst into a flood of tears.

Boyd had no time for expressing sympathy, however, even if so inclined. He at once produced the box of bogus rings, saying curtly:

"I also have brought these home to you, young woman, along with the crime that goes with them. A very shrewd game you've been playing, for a fact. Luckily, I——"

"Oh, I'll confess, sir! I'll confess all!" interrupted the girl, with her voice choked with welling sobs. "I am guilty. My name is Celeste——"

"Yes; I'm well aware of it."

"You know that, too?"

"Where are the stolen rings? Come, come, tears will not avail you anything. I want the rings at once, and——"

"They are here, they are here, sir," sobbed and moaned the girl, tottering to a desk in one corner of the room. "Oh, oh, if I return them, sir, can I not avoid prosecution? This is my first offense, and I——"

"Enough of that," said Boyd sternly, as he joined her at the desk. "In this bag, eh? Yes, so they are, the entire lot. A very clever job, my girl, I'm sure. You now will have to go with me."

Sobbing as if her heart were breaking, Celeste, which was really her name, had produced a small plush bag from the desk, in which Boyd quickly discovered the missing rings. With his last remarks, he thrust the bag

into his pocket, and laid his hand on the arm of the weeping girl.

"But I—I can't go thus!" she moaned piteously. "I first must make a change. At least let me—let me put on suitable clothing."

"This suit served you well enough in your knavery," growled Boyd, glancing about.

"But I—I——"

"Where are your other garments?" interrupted Boyd, with implacable austerity.

"In the next room—see for yourself," wept Celeste. "It will take but little time for me to change——"

"I propose to see for myself," growled Boyd, striding toward the room indicated. "No back-stairway escape for you, my clever miss, take my word for that."

"Indeed, sir, I'll not attempt it."

"See that you don't. I'll let you make the change, since I shall wait here for your confederate, who should presently——"

He was interrupted. A clock on a church near-by struck three. The last clang of the bell had not sounded, however, when a heavy hand was laid on the knob of the door.

The face, voice, and bearing of Celeste changed like a flash. She darted to one side, with her eyes fairly blazing, and uttered a single piercing shriek.

"Don't enter! Beware!" she screamed wildly.

Felix Boyd wheeled toward the door as if electrified.

The girl's warning had come just a second too late. The intruder had the door partly open when Boyd turned, and the latter beheld his face.

"God! The Big Finger!" he roared involuntarily.

So, indeed, it was; and the man's hard, vicious countenance, when he beheld Felix Boyd in the room, took on a change that pen could not describe. A criminal and a cur always, less loyal to the girl than she had been to him, the Big Finger looked after himself alone. As Boyd sprang toward him, he closed the door with a thundering bang—and turned the key.

Boyd instantly whipped out his revolver, and fired three shots through the door.

A yell of derision answered them.

Then the closing of a second door fell upon his ear. He swung round with an oath. He alone stood in the curling smoke that now filled the chamber. Celeste had darted into the inner room, and closed and locked the door.

"Good-by! Good-by, Mr. Officer!" she screamed through the panel, as Boyd wrenched vainly at the knob. "You may see me later—unless I see you first!"

It was a situation and turn of affairs to have enraged any man, yet it served only to bring into play all that was most daring and desperate in Felix Boyd's nature. With a snarl of suppressed fury, he darted to one of the front windows, and threw it open to look down. The central office man was at that moment entering the hotel.

"Jimmie! Jimmie!" shrieked Boyd, discharging his revolver into the air. "Jimmie, I say!"

Coleman halted, and looked up.

"The Big Finger—inside!" yelled Boyd, like a man in a frenzy! "The Big Finger! Nail him as he comes down!"

Coleman waved his hand, and dashed into the house.

Boyd then turned, and darted through an adjoining room of the suite, and reached one of the rear windows. On a heavy iron hook in the casing hung a long coil of rope, a fire-escape, knotted at intervals. Without an instant's hesitation, Boyd threw open the window, and cast out the line.

Then he went over the sill, and, suspended sixty feet above the pavements, he lowered himself to the window below that from which he had emerged, which, fortunately, was open.

He swung himself into the room. The suite corresponded to the one above. Darting into the room below that in which Celeste had eluded him, Boyd discovered a door leading to a back stairway.

He never could have told just how he went down the three flights of stairs, or why his brains were not knocked out in the headlong descent. As he came down the last flight, however, he found himself in a side corridor of the hotel, not far from the office. For an instant, he scarce knew which way to turn in search of his quarry, for there was not a person in sight.

Then, darting out of a coat-room near-by, into which she had entered in the hope of securing a hat or cap, came—Celeste!

She recoiled as if struck with a whip—and then Felix Boyd again had her in his arms.

"So, so, my pretty maid!" he cried triumphantly. "Despite that you're a woman—I'll hold you this time!"

"Hold, and be d——d!" hissed Celeste, with resentful eyes upturned to his.

* * * * *

Just before five o'clock that afternoon, Mr. Felix Boyd, accompanied by the central office man, entered the private office of Dabney & Co., in which the head of the firm then was seated. Placing a small pasteboard box and a plush bag on the merchant's desk, Boyd said quietly:

"Here are your stolen rings, Mr. Dabney, in this bag. The box of bogus ones—ah! well, you may keep them as a gift from your humble servant."

Dabney, with shaking hands, tore open the dainty bag, and viewed its glittering contents.

"All here! Every one!" he cried, leaping up. "Good heavens, Mr. Boyd, how did you accomplish it?"

Boyd laughed softly, and dropped into the nearest chair.

"Very easily," said he dryly. "If you carefully examine the lacquer table which I—ahem!—recently purchased, you will find that, in writing her note on a single sheet of paper, the pencil used by the thief was applied so forcibly, probably under secret excitement, that the polished surface of the table carries a faint indentation of each word that she inscribed."

"Ye gods!"

"If you tip the table so that the light strikes it properly, you may read with but little difficulty: 'Exchange made! Hotel Tripoli, three sharp! Celeste.'"

"Good heavens! Is that so?"

"Decidedly so," smiled Boyd. "That appointment thus discovered, Mr. Dabney, the rest was comparatively easy."

Dabney threw both hands into the air.

"If you ever ask me for a bill of that table, Mr. Felix

Boyd," he cried, with a ringing laugh, "you will offend me beyond telling."

"Good enough, sir," smiled Boyd, rising to go. "I will keep the table as a reminder of a deucedly clever and dangerous woman."

"You certainly measured her correctly, Felix," said Coleman, reverting to Boyd's last remark, as the two men sauntered toward Pine Street.

"Yes, so I think, Jimmie," nodded Boyd. "It's well we have her behind the bars."

"Yet what an infernal shame that her confederate escaped," growled Coleman. "Do my very best, Felix, I could not locate him."

"Humph!" laughed Boyd. "It's not the first time we have found the Big Finger too slippery for us. But we'll land him yet—sooner or later we'll land him. Take my word for that, Jimmie, dear boy. I'm on the trail of the Big Finger. Here, have a Henry Clay."

THE END.



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